

# BANDWAGON

MAY-JUNE 2010





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## THE FRONT COVER

In 1929 the Illinois Lithograph Company of Chicago became the primary poster supplier to the Ringling-Barnum Circus. Most of its work that year was copies of bills from the Strobridge Lithograph Company, the show's main printer from 1907 to 1928.

Illinois also created three extraordinary designs for the Greatest Show on Earth, all departures from Strobridge's signature realism. These elegant bills had impressionistic motifs, a minimum of text, and startling black backgrounds.

The stylish rendition of the pretty equestrienne on a horse on this month's cover is one of the new Illinois designs. The garbled word order of "The Greatest Show on Earth," and the Art Deco lettering of the title are hardly common elements in field show advertising. The bill's characters, both two and four footed, almost seem to

float in outer space as nothing else appears in the image. The result is a likeness not seen before or since. Original in Pfening Archives.

## PRESIDENT'S COMMENTS

It is quite an honor to be named as President of CHS, especially since I am only the second woman to fill this position. I certainly can't step into the shoes of circus performer Bette Leonard, who was not only President for a record eleven years (1947-1957), but also had a significant role in the very early years of the society, when a small group of individuals formed the Circus Historical Society.

The past six months have been busy. Bob Cline, CHS Secretary, and I spent about three months updating the membership list and the *Bandwagon* mailing list. Bob has been incredibly valuable in sending out appreciation letters for members who donated addi-

tional dollars above their annual dues. He set up and maintains our Facebook page with over 300 "followers," and took CHS on the road with a display at Carson & Barnes and the Barnett Bros. Circus festival. Bob keeps new members informed with emails and phone calls. He initiated our new renewal letter that included the survey that will give us information on our membership and their interests.

As often experienced in the past, CHS needs to increase its membership. Thanks to recent efforts, we now have about 700 members and subscribers, up from a low that hadn't been experienced since the 1960s. However, the vast majority of our members are age 55 or older.

CHS is your organization. You can contact me by phone at 920-731-1448, and email at [circushistoricalsociety@gmail.com](mailto:circushistoricalsociety@gmail.com). As an aside, if any members have information on Bette Leonard, her career and/or role in CHS, please let me know. Judy Griffin

## NEW MEMBERS

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# A Visit with Ringling-Barnum During Its Last Two Weeks

By Faye O. Braathen

*Who knew? Hidden in the huge collection of circus memorabilia donated to Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois by C. H. S. member Sverre O. Braathen (1895-1974) were hundreds of pages of unpublished manuscripts by both him and his wife Faye. Many essays were part of a history of the American circus for which they could not find a publisher. Others, such as this account of the last days of Ringling-Barnum under canvas in 1956, were more contemporary. While the Braathens' byline appeared many times in Bandwagon and White Tops, the extent of their literary output was not known until Maureen Brunsdale, head of the Special Collections and Rare Books at the University's Milner Library, generously made this article and others available for use in Bandwagon.*

*The talented Bex Braathen, to use his sobriquet, was not only a prolific writer on circus subjects, but also wrote a book-length monograph on Norwegian-Americans in the Civil War, and most amazingly published a book on baseball immortal Ty Cobb in 1928. The first authorized biography of the great player; it is something of a rare book today.*

*Braathen was also a gifted photographer, taking thousands of Kodachrome slides of circuses. Illinois State University is in the process of putting the ones from Ringling-Barnum on the Internet. His photographic work is among the best ever on circus topics, only a notch or so below the acknowledged masters of the field, Fred Glasier, Harry Atwell, and Edward Kely. Braathen's pictures illustrate this article with some being mentioned in the text. He meticulously numbered his slides and created a record book that identified each one by date, location and subject, a practice woefully lacking by most photographers. The captions of the photos in this article are also Braathen originals. Fred D. Pfening III*

We left our home, the White Tops, about 6:30 the morning of June 30<sup>th</sup>, [1956] grateful that once again we might "join out" for a happy two weeks with our many friends on The Greatest Show on Earth. We had feared this circus might not be on tour this season. When the show abandoned the traditional outdoor advertising, we felt confident they had made a grievous error. The basic appeal of the circus is to the eternal child in all of us, but what child reads the theater columns of the newspaper when seeking information regarding the coming of a circus? It is our belief that it takes a colorful poster spread across a billboard on an empty city lot or along a country highway to attract the attention and whet the appetite of boys and girls. Every brightly colored billboard is a silent missionary winning its quota of converts each year. Dispense with these tempters and a whole host of circus devotees are lost across the breadth of the nation. If there is no clamoring demand on the part of the six-year-olds what excuse has the sixty-year-old to go to see the circus?

When, therefore, early on the afternoon of our second day we came upon a goodly number of billboards heralding the coming of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus to Warren, Pennsylvania on July 9, we were delighted. We then understood how it was that the circus we have so loved had been able to take to the sawdust trail after leaving the Gardens in the East. Now we dared to hope that all would be well with the Greatest Show on Earth, and that "children of all ages" across this rich, broad land of ours might continue to become enraptured with the sights and sounds and smells that spell circus.

We felt a warm glow deep within us and knew that we had been more anxious than we had realized regarding the fate of this Wisconsin born and bred circus. But our elation was destined to be short lived, for at Elmira, New York the next morning we picked

Second section with diesel. Meadville, Pennsylvania. July 11, 1956.





up a newspaper and read that the previous night (Sunday, July 1) at Geneva, a high wind had made ribbons of the Ringling big top. We are so completely familiar with the long and amazing history of this circus that we knew that poor management must have played a role in this disaster. That spread of canvas has survived the raging elements for seven decades. We knew that in the last years of the last century and in the early years of this one canvas and cord, stake and guy line were made of no better material (if as good) than they are today. It had to be the human factor that was faulty.

After breakfast, a trip to the runs brought further disillusionment. There was not the usual methodical precision in unloading.



First section at runs. Elmira, New York. July 2, 1956.

The first train was unloaded and permitted to occupy both tracks available to it, while the second and third trains had to be unloaded farther down in the yards and on single tracks, thus slowing the already delayed haul to the lot. When some of the circus folk were asked the reason for this the answer was, "We don't know," an answer that was to become all too familiar during our two weeks trek with the show.

After a belated lunch at our beautiful Tom Sawyer Motel, we drove the short distance to the Chemung County Fairgrounds, which nestled between forest-clad mountains. Here we watched weary workmen struggling to erect the center poles, spot the heavy seat wagons, hang the side walls, place props, and do the multitude of other chores incident to readying the arena for the matinee. It

Rock and roll with elephants. Dunkirk, New York. July 4, 1956.



was all too obvious that the various crews of workmen were without adequate direction and guidance. Some sat or stood about, not unwilling to work but not knowing what was wanted of them. Gone were the bosses of the various departments who in the past have overcome obstacles of every type and description as they directed their crews. Here were the workmen, in fairly adequate supply, but the bosses had either been fired or resigned in disgust last season, and the efforts of not unloyal but leaderless workmen was truly pathetic.

We heard that last year's big top was to be sent up from Sarasota; some said by air and others by truck.

The matinee that Monday began at 6 o'clock, with a cloud-flecked canopy of blue arching overhead. This was a handicap to some of the performers, especially the aerialists who found it difficult to find a "bead" on which to fix their gaze. Fortunately there was little wind, but such as there was, was not welcomed by the jugglers. However, in true circus tradition every performer who was permitted to work did so with verve and eagerness. The aerial ballet could not work, since there were no quarter poles on which to attach the rigging.

This matinee 'neath nature's incomparable "top" of azure festooned with gossamer clouds afforded a wondrous opportunity to camera devotees, and Sverre [Braathen] took full advantage of it. He shot color and black-and-white pictures until 9 o'clock, thanks to daylight savings time and the fact that Elmira is well west in the Eastern time belt.

The night show began at 9:30 and held a good-sized audience enchanted until midnight. We chose to sit in one of our favorite spots, high near one end of the tent, and thus had an ideal perspective of the show as a whole. The performance was beautiful with the exception of the spec, dubbed "Say it with Flowers," which was definitely far below Ringling standards. In this number eight or ten girls rode kneeling in plain wooden wheelbarrows, pushed by men in something less than glamorous wardrobe. The floats were most prosaic and never "floated" on imagination's sea. In the absence of the dry-cleaning car, the costumes had lost their glitter and shimmer. This spec might have done credit to one of the smaller circuses, but seen in the Ringling tent it bespoke a sorry tale, one that saddened us as we watched, for we feared it foretold unhappy days ahead for this long-time king of the outdoor amusement world.

As we were leaving the tent this night, we discovered George Barlow of Binghamton, New York whom we first met that historic August 3, 1933 when Ringling Bros. returned to their old hometown, Baraboo, Wisconsin for a homecoming that will never be forgotten by the thousands who were lucky enough to be present. George is a gifted circus fan, and we would gladly have visited with him for several hours, but we had arranged to meet another friend of many years, Joe Minchin of Paterson, New Jersey who rivals our record of circusing across this country. Joined by Gena and Charlie Morowski, we drove to the city for a midnight dinner. We had not seen Joe since the Circus Fans Association convention in Dayton, Ohio in 1948, and last visited with Gena and Charlie in our hometown of Madison [Wisconsin] on circus day a year ago, so there was much good conversation across the coffee cups. We then drove Charlie and Gena to the runs and took Joe to his hotel, promising to be his guests there for breakfast the following morning.

The next morning Bex [Sverre Braathen's nickname] had the misfortune to slip when showering, with a painfully wrenched



back and side, but no fractured bones. So for the balance of the trip Faye was chief baggage wrestler and ate accordingly!

We met Joe at the Mark Twin Hotel as agreed. Samuel Clemens lived for many years in Elmira and married one of its daughters, and the dining room of the Mark Twin is decorated with murals



Seats without a top. Olean, New York. July 3, 1956.

depicting scenes he immortalized in his books. The food was excellent, and what a heart-warming visit we had with this retiring but gallant member of C.F.A.! He shared our fears for the future of the Ringling-Barnum Circus and the grief born of those fears. Joe was planning a trip to the far west to spend some time with our dear friends the Wallendas, and promised to carry with him our tokens of affection and best wishes. Perhaps another summer we may be able to vacation with them.

We bade Joe a fond farewell and at 9:30 headed Chief Pontiac toward Olean and another day on the Ringling lot. En route at Boliver we experienced one of those little acts of courtesy that leaves a happy memory long after. We had stopped at a red light. There was a signboard giving highway directions at this intersection. We were reading this when a big truck drove up and obscured our view. Noting this and perhaps also noting our out-of-state license, the driver put that big truck into reverse that we might avail ourselves of the information on that guide post. Not too many auto drivers would do that.

The day was warm but again the humidity was low, so it was ideal for driving and circusing. We surmised that the highway followed century-old mountain trails through that beautiful countryside where Faye's forebears lived. Mayhap some of the great uncles and aunts drove their ox-drawn covered wagons along that very route as they left the "crowded" east for the frontier in Wisconsin and Iowa.

Arrived in Olean, we had no difficulty procuring comfortable and quiet quarters in a nice motel and an excellent lunch in a nearby restaurant. We went out to the lot about 2 o'clock. It was large but rough in terrain and covered with "lot lice," the term circus workingmen use to describe towners who stand about watching the set up and tear down of the show, and ducat holders. A brilliant

blue, cloud-draped sky was the big top for the 4 o'clock matinee, and camera bugs again enjoyed a field day. Business was fair, and we've since wondered how many Oleanites (or is it Oleanders?) would have attended that performance had they but known that the Greatest Show on Earth might never again play their city. More would have seen the performances had they been given on time, but many people today have other commitments that preclude such long waits.

The 4<sup>th</sup> of July greeted us with a cool, misty drizzle, but Bex's injured side was no worse, so we rejoiced. We enjoyed a good breakfast in the motel coffee shop, packed, and were on our way about 9:30, driving to Dunkirk in a steady drizzle. We discovered that our route lay through Little Valley, New York. Faye's paternal grandfather lived there as a boy and his sister sleeps the eternal sleep in that lovely cemetery, so we tarried there for a time. We systematically sought among the older graves the tombstone of Aunt Libby, but wind and sleet, rain and snow, sun and frost have effaced her name from the simple marble slab. It was too dark there in the pines and maples, rain-bathed, to take a colored picture of that hallowed spot, so we had to content ourselves with black-and-white snap shots. These are good, considering the lack of light, and shall be added to one of our memory albums. This green sanctuary cast a spell over us, and many memories flooded our minds as we drove the winding way to the pretty city of Dunkirk that lies near the northeastern tip of Lake Erie.

At noon we registered at the deluxe Dunkirk Motel and mailed postals to some of our friends showing "our" room, as beautifully decorated and furnished as any hotel and ever so much more convenient for the auto tourist. An excellent restaurant nearby tempted us to indulge our ravenous appetites. Queer, how much more food one consumes on trips than at home. Good thing we are not fifty-two week gypsies instead of the two week tribe!

Logano and aerialist and a concession stand. Dunkirk, New York. July 4, 1956.







Arturos performing on ladder without a top. Olean, New York. July 3, 1956.

We then drove to the outskirts of the city to take pictures of our second circus billboard, a duplicate of the giraffe one at Elmira except for the date sheet. In fact, with the exception of a lion billboard near Warren, Pennsylvania, we saw only the giraffe one oft repeated along the highways. The child in us pined in vain for the polka-dot gowned clown, the tarlatan clad girl tip-toe atop a broad backed galloping white horse, the golden-haired beauty in bright red garments swinging from a high trapeze, and all the other circus greats created by the pens of such gifted men as Roland Butler and Charlie Kennely. They have apparently joined the caravan of what-used-to-be in Spangleland. We could not help but ask each other if these were again made a part of the sawdust trail each summer would the circus not be reborn in all its "pristine glory," as Dexter Fellows was wont to describe his enchanted world.

We stopped on the way to the lot to purchase luscious peaches, pears, grapes, strawberries, and cantaloupes to take to some of our friends on the show. Never have we seen strawberries so big and red and tempting as those that graced these wayside fruit markets that abound in western New York state. About 2 o'clock we joined a long caravan of bumper-to-bumper cars circus-bound. No need here to inquire the way to the lot. The children of Dunkirk, "from six to sixty," were twice, perhaps thrice, fortunate, for they had the magic that is circus on the summer's biggest holiday, the Fourth of July. Remember when Christmas, the Fourth of July, and Circus Day were the most eventful days of the 365 granted to us each year? Will it ever be so again or are we now in so blasé, superficially sophisticated age that we have no days-to-be-remembered each year? Be that as it may, we venture the guess that if the Big One fails to again take to the road, those who saw it this Fourth of July will long remember the occasion.

Here the matinee was only a few minutes late, to everyone's delight. The Fourth is the day when the artists on Ringling Bros. give a show for themselves between the two performances given for the public, so the quiet-hour is more essential than normally.

With matinees beginning late in the afternoon there can be no quiet hour between shows. In fact, it is necessary to ask the matinee patrons to leave by the rear exit, since those awaiting the night show are jammed into the midway. Too, the Glorious Fourth is the occasion for a real old-fashioned holiday celebration in the Ringling cook house, and this year that tradition was not violated. Edna Antes, our dear friend of Evansville days, asked us to be her guests for this gala meal. Would that we could have had a colored picture of the cook house that day!

Every table in both the workers' end and the artists-executives' end wore their red-and white checked linen table cloths, with vases of red, white, and blue flowers parading down the middle of each. At every plate stood a whipped cream garnished fruit cup with a bright red cherry atop its peak. Paper napkins bore the great seal and the flag of the country born on this date nearly two centuries ago. The long tables were so heavily laden with a variety of foods as to be reminiscent of the Thanksgiving tables at grandmother's not quite that long ago, Mr. [John]Staley, the cook house major domo, had enlisted the help of many of the circus girls to help prepare fresh shrimp for those 1000 diners! And the treat of treats for the workmen, and for not a few of the performers, was great tubs of cans of iced beer which were dispensed at the entrance. The day had grown warm and a little humid, so that after struggling to erect the sadly battered circus that cold beer struck the right spot for many. Golden brown fried chicken flanked by mashed potatoes and ears of Golden Bantum sweet corn graced each plate brought by hurrying waiters to every diner. Whether it was the fact that it was the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, or the fact that Mr. Staley had outdone himself in preparing this banquet, or the fact that the between-show show was about to be given after days of rehearsal in secret behind wardrobe tent or in a clump of trees, or perhaps a combination of all these factors, it was true that there was a relaxed atmosphere of contentment in the cook house that day, an atmosphere quite at variance with the tension and anxiety and uncertainty that had characterized those same

Hildlys, aerialists performing without top. Elmira, New York. July 2, 1956.



people the two previous days we had spent with them. It seemed like the "good old days" when we all sat lazily about the lot chatting and laughing and planning for the hours after the night show.

Edna had to return to her office in one of the wagons to dispense tickets to the various ticket sellers, so we joined Gena and Charlie Morowski and their son Emrich to witness the between-show show. Once again we were glad that we were "on" for this annual holiday affair. We always thrill to the versatility of those artists. Not alone are they trapeze artists, jugglers, bareback riders, or tight-





Justino Loyal standing on galloping horse in performance without top. Elmira, New York. July 2, 1956.

wire wizards, but many of them are musicians or painters or gifted in needle work. But the versatility that makes itself apparent during this show-for-performers on the Fourth is their power of mimicry. For instance, we have seen Justino Loyal captivating huge audiences with his beautifully executed and daring feats atop galloping horses. Imagine then our delight to see this same man fascinating his more critical audience of fellow artists with his burlesque of the Rixo's high ladder balancing act, and, a little later, his take-off on the Whirlwinds (a quartet of German girl tumblers) in which he is joined by three other male performers. "Whatever Justino does, he does well," remarked Gena, and we heartily agreed! Jefta Loyal's twelve-year-old daughter was not to be outdone by her famous uncle. She amazed all of us by her fine imitation of Miss Mara, the stellar Spanish trapeze artist who two years ago fell forty-four feet as she attempted to execute her difficult heel catch, breaking bones throughout her body and who was again performing a year later. The little Loyal girl did not work on as high a trapeze as Miss Mara, but so polished was her performance as to hold promise of greater things to come. When she retired "backstage," it was to be taken into the arms of her overjoyed, talented mother, the greatest acclaim that can be accorded to any artist anywhere. Her audience of circus folk was not to be denied, and the child had to give several curtain calls. There were other cleverly conceived and executed numbers, followed by the usual stake driving contests and races. One contest was missing from this year's repertoire, the pie eating spectacle. Bob Dover had ordered the pies and just before this show of shows, discovered the dealer had delivered frozen pies. Fearing the show might not underwrite the possible dentist bills that might follow attempts to consume such in a contest of this kind, they were left in the old red wagon that so long served Pat Valdo as a private dressing room. This year that wagon seemed to us as forlorn as a deserted house! Pat was in Sarasota, and the show was not the same without him!!

We were told that the band was reluctant to play for this year's between-shows show on the Fourth, contending they were the hardest workers on the lot, another straw in the winds of adversity that were blowing ever stronger across the Greatest Show on Earth. Merle Evans and his musicians always considered it a privilege to play for this Independence Day event, and we are sure they would have been hurt had they not been allowed to partici-

pate. We doubt they had to be invited to do so.

As we two sat there in the stands with the sky above us instead of the great expanse of midnight blue canvas, we were conscious of the absence of Henry Ringling (Buddy) North, Pat Valdo, Merle Evans, Frank McClosky, Walter Kernan, Willis Lawson, and others of that group of executives whose very presence on this gala occasion was mute but eloquent testimony to the oneness of this magnificent amusement organization in the happy years now gone. This, too, clutched at our hearts, already aching with the fear that our beloved god did, indeed, have feet of clay. We wondered how many of those performers as they burlesqued the acts of fellow artists or from the stands applauded the clever work of their comrades, were actually doing so in the spirit of "laugh, clown, laugh." Perhaps it was this sadness in the midst of laughter that caused us to leave the lot a little early that evening.

Next morning we awakened to a cool, cloudy day with a promise of rain in the air. Indeed it began to drizzle as we loaded our luggage, and once again we were grateful for the foresight of architects in designing motels with overhanging canopies that enable one to back a car to one's door and, so, load baggage without getting wet. A good breakfast, and shortly after 9 o'clock we departed Dunkirk for Niagara Falls, the Mecca of tourists from virtually every country in the world. Rain fell all the way. The first part of the drive was very pretty with glimpses of Lake Erie to our left, but strangely enough as one approaches Niagara Falls the countryside becomes less lovely. It was as though these beautiful creations of Nature, the mountains, felt constrained to remain at a reverent distance from the grandeur that is Niagara Falls.

We recalled that this was the third anniversary of our last trip to the Falls. We toured Ontario, Canada with Ringling in July, 1953. They played St. Catherine's on July 5<sup>th</sup>, and we spent that morning at the Falls. It had rained that day, too, and our little English friend Gladys Rimmer had held an umbrella over the camera as Bex snapped colored pictures of the Falls from various vantage points on the Canadian side. Because of the delayed arrival of the circus trains this year we did not have any of our performer pals with us, so Faye held the umbrella over the camera the while Bex shot pictures from the several vantage points on the American side. Because we have never had an opportunity to take pictures of this tremendous spectacle on a sunny day we purchased some Kodachrome slides in the city. We were disappointed in the quality of these when we later projected them on the screen but learned again that "naught is so evil but some special good doth bring." The greater excellence of the slides Sverre took in the rain has been a little flattering. We were delighted to discover how very much the park adjacent to the Falls has improved since last we visited it some twenty-five years ago. The grounds now match those on the Canadian side of the river. Both are models of what parkways surrounding such beauty spots should be. They put our own Wisconsin Dells surroundings to shame with their honky tonks, concession stands, and aggressive ticket sellers. Nature bestowed on our state a wondrous beauty in the dells of the Wisconsin River, and it is a sad commentary on our lack of public spiritedness that we have permitted greedy private interests to exploit it and reduce it to a giant Coney Island.

After a leisurely lunch we parked the car on a shady side street near the runs. Faye listened to the car radio while she addressed post cards and Bex took train pictures. The 1954 big top had arrived from Sarasota. It was wider and somewhat shorter than the 1956 top the wind had riddled at Geneva, so it required several



hours for the riggers to make the necessary adjustments in the location of poles, stakes, guy lines, etc. The car radio brought the flash that the matinee had been cancelled, so when Sverre returned it was agreed that we might as well return to our motel. There we read the papers and rested an hour or so before enjoying an excellent dinner.

Arriving at the lot we met friends of the Morowski's. These were people they had known in England during the war when Charlie served in the uniform of his beloved Poland and Gena did what she could to aid the war effort, while they both worried about their only child Emerich trapped in Poland. This English couple



Charles Morowski. Horseman. Batavia, New York. July 6, 1956.

and their young son recently migrated to Canada and are now living in Sarnia. It was a gladsome reunion of four intelligent people of different nationalities who had shared the fortunes of World War II and rejoiced that it was England and her allies that won.

We went on one of our visiting expeditions around that huge tent. We particularly enjoyed our chat with Mr. Adanos, the center ring juggler. He is the first circus artist we have known who is also an avid collector of circusana. Last year he gave us a list of the circus books in his collection. They numbered something over 400 and were written in several languages. He has played in many countries and is an interesting conversationalist.

That night we sat through the performance, viewing it from seats in front of the center ring, opposite the band, which was again spotted in the middle of the tent on the rear side, a place many circus lovers have long felt the band should occupy. There were four violins and a base viol in the band this year, but try as we would we could not detect their contribution to the music if the brass and percussion were playing. American circus tradition dictates a brass band. The presence of strings was probably in line with the management's tendency to abandon the traditional American circus and convert it to some sort of hybrid revue-circus. It is the opinion of thousands of fans and critics across the country that this is the basic mistake that lead to many of the others that this year led to the closing of the Greatest Show on Earth. We feel that Mr. North failed to appreciate that in the circus built by his world famous, immortal uncles he inherited something unique, something quiet different from a skate revue, a musical comedy, or a girl show, and that his failure to realize and capitalize on this fact has led him sorely astray. From our center seats we obtained a better view of the center ring acts, but lost the beautiful panoramic view of all the aerial acts afforded by seats in or near the end. Of course, one cannot hope to see every act in this great show unless

one has the opportunity to sit through from fifteen to twenty-five performances each year. For many years past we have viewed it from fifteen to twenty times and still failed to see the complete performance of each and every artist. One frequently hears the comment from circus goers, "There is just too much to see in the Ringling-Barnum Circus," and yet Americans have repeatedly refused to patronize a one-ring show such as is common in Europe.

We left Niagara about 9 o'clock Friday morning with Batavia, New York as our day's destination, passing the Bell Aircraft plant just outside of Niagara. In Batavia we had our Pontiac serviced. It is a small town, about 17,000, but we found good stores along its main street. As we sauntered along looking for a camera shop we were intrigued by a big sign over a restaurant. It read "Critic's." We wondered if it were owned by some former newspaper critic or was the name that of some immigrant to our shores. Having passed it two or three times we decided to lunch there. We found the food very good, the service adequate, and the price surprisingly modest, but we did not learn the origin of the name Critic's.

Arriving at the lot, we found the riggers had done a better job of adjusting the old and sadly worn 1954 top to the new 1956 poles. They still had to park two seat wagons in the back yard because of the difference in the dimensions of the two tents. Despite the smallness of the town and the lateness of the matinee, business was good. This night we returned to seats near the end to watch the show.

Griddle cakes, bacon and eggs were in order for breakfast Saturday morning, for the temperature at 9 o'clock was only 67°. We then bade the little town of Batavia farewell and leisurely drove the thirty-five miles to Buffalo, which we reached an hour and a half later. The cool weather and the short drives added to the pleasure of this year's circus vacation; no need for alarms o'mornings, and no exhausting drives to the next city.

In Buffalo we chose a motel well within the city limits for the only time on our trip. We prefer outlying ones because they provide more quiet, for the quiet that prevails at Waubesa Beach has ill equipped us for sleeping 'midst traffic noises and city confusion. However, we were fortunate and obtained a very nicely furnished room facing an inner court at the Mohawk Motel so we had no concern about the possibility of lost sleep the two nights we would spend there. Also, the motel had a very good coffee shop under the same roof, and a large parking lot, so all conveniences

Takeo Usui on 45 degree angle cable in open air without a top. Dunkirk, New York. July 4, 1956.





were assured, giving us a pleasant sense of leisure.

After a light lunch we decided to go to the lot a little earlier than we had been doing on this trip. It was well we did, for we had to make some inquiries and discovered the lot was some eight miles distant from our motel. The lot lay immediately adjacent to a large cemetery and proved to be an annex thereto, acquired for future expansion. In fact, the layer-out of the lot found a lone grave near the center, and it required considerable ingenuity on his part to isolate it and thus assure it against desecration, but this he did. The lot was dirty, all sod having been removed for some reason. Fortunately, indeed, that we had no rain there. The day was cool and the sky cloud bedecked.

Here the matinee was only one hour late, and again spirits dared to rise. It is true "hope springs eternal in the human breast." The tent was nearly filled, and the performers responded with a beautiful performance. After a good mid-afternoon meal in the cook house, we sat about during the abbreviated quiet hour, chatting and laughing, the uncertainties regarding the show's future temporarily banished. This year we noted the absence of the card, chess, and checker games in which the performers have always indulged during the quiet hour in previous years. Whether this was due to the brevity of the quiet hour, to worry regarding the plight of the circus, or to some other reasons we never learned. It was exceedingly difficult for the girls to get their personal laundry done and they had to resort to buying extra garments at times. We constantly saw pretty stars in their make-up and costumes ironing while awaiting their cue to enter the rings. In other years the big top has been erected by noon or shortly thereafter, and dozens of little clothes lines were to be seen strung between the guy ropes, each bearing its quota of dainties, all of which would be ready to iron by mid-to late afternoon.

Midnight found us back at the Mohawk Motel, to find its coffee shop closed. A short jaunt up the street located a lunch room where we had a light good night snack. We went to bed about 1 o'clock to "sleep the sleep of the just." After breakfast Sunday we drove around Buffalo. We had several times been in the vicinity of this lake port but this was our first actual visit to the city. We concluded we preferred to live near one of Madison's smaller lakes. We made some purchases in drug stores for some of our circus friends and found the clerks to be most gracious and helpful.

The day grew hot and humid, so we ate a light lunch and left for the distant lot. Since the tent had been erected Saturday, the Sunday matinee went on time to a near capacity house. Life in the back yard took on more nearly the pattern of its familiar routine. Sverre spent the afternoon taking pictures, and Faye visited. Toward the end of the show we learned that Howard Suesz, the owner of the Hagen Bros., and the Clyde Bros. Circuses, was a visitor. We therefore made our way to the show's guest section of seats and found Mr. and Mrs. Suesz sitting there with Jimmy Armstrong, their and our long time friend who is studying law while he clowns on the Ringling Circus. We learned later that Jimmy had helped Suesz put up the paper for his first show and that the former has the No. 1 ticket and first poster for that circus in his collection. We joined their party for a good visit. After the show we all left by the rear entrance to meet Little Mary Sue Suesz. As we were about to enter the back yard an usher who failed to recognize us asked us to please leave by the front entrance. When we told him we were all guests of the show he replied, "Well hurry; there's a terrible storm coming!" A minute later we heard Bob Dover make the announcement, "No show tonight; pack your trunks before you leave. No show tonight; pack your trunks before you leave" as he circled that big tent.

We hurried to Morowski's dressing room (one of the seat wagons) to put our folding chairs into it ere it should be locked and taken to the trains. Gena had not yet heard the cancellation announcement and invited us to again go with her to the cook house. Informed of the impending storm she hurriedly packed their trunks, and the cook house was forgotten. We moved our car to the front of the lot where it would not be in the way of the trunks and tractors that were hurrying to complete the tear-down before the storm should break, wreaking more havoc on that bedeviled circus. I waited in the car while Bex went for a conference with Noylles Burkhardt, the show's attorney. The sky grew more ominous and there was some wind. The personnel buses were



Gena Morowski and Faye O. Braathen near personnel bus. Akron, Ohio. July 13, 1956.

crammed with performers going to the trains, undoubtedly with increasing uneasiness as to the show's future. After awhile Edna Antes and her assistant in the handling of tickets, Mr. [Bill] Taggart, came along to catch one of these buses. I hailed them and they were happy to accept our invitation to ride with us to the trains. The four of us debated going into the city for dinner, but they feared the train might pull out early, so we abandoned the idea. Each of the cars on the performers section of the train is equipped with a kitchen where food may be obtained, and they thought it best to depend on this for their evening meal that Sunday. We drove on into the city and decided upon the motel coffee shop because of the threat of a severe storm. After a very satisfactory dinner we retired to our room. Soon the rain came but it was less severe than forecast (Mr. Madison Weather Man take comfort). With nothing else to do, Buffalo's wondrously soft water tempted me to do yet another silky laundry while Bex clipped circus items from our accumulation of newspapers, to be later pasted in albums and added to our already voluminous collection of circus source material. Early to Slumberland, taking with us our anxieties as to Spangleland, the while the rain sang a lullaby outside.

About 8:30 Monday morning we bade Buffalo and New York state farewell and headed for Warren, Pennsylvania, the city we had noted was so well billed for the coming of the Greatest Show on Earth when we were en route to Elmira to "join out" for our annual tour. Half an hour later the rain was playing a wild game of tag with our windshield wipers. This soon turned to a game of blind man's bluff with the visibility next to nil and driving reduced to near that. At Hamburg it was so dark that the street lights had been turned on.

Warren is nearly 100 miles west of Buffalo, and we took three hours to drive it, first because of the rain, and later because it was





The midway. Warren, Pennsylvania. July 9, 1956.

such a pretty route. The rain had ceased ere we reached our destination, and white cloud gondolas drifted on an azure "sea," giving promise of a good circus day. The motel at which we had planned to stay was without a vacancy, although it was not yet noon. This was due to the fact that a month earlier the hotel had burned, and the motel was accommodating some of its permanent guests. A gracious young hostess suggested we drive on another twelve miles to Youngsville where there was a AAA accredited motel. This we did, obtaining a nicely furnished unit at a very reasonable fee. We bought fruit and gas, had a lunch, and discovered that within one hour we had paid the state of Pennsylvania \$1.00 in sales taxes. We went to the lot about 1 o'clock, delighted that it was a dream site worthy of the dream day. A wooded mountain lay parallel with the tent on the far side, and another forest-clad mountain lay less than a mile away on the other side. The level valley between these mountains was as level as North Dakota's prairies. The circus lot was an airport with a grassy carpet well clipped. This lying beneath that cloud-flecked arc of blue overhead would have seemed beauty enough, but prodigal Nature had added yet another dream element. Broken Straw Creek glided along the outer edge of this lot. Faye found herself content to sit in her lawn chair and drink in the beauty of sky and landscape while her circus friends busied themselves with cleaning mud from shoes and boots, washing personals, shampooing their hair, and doing the numerous chores that seem the lot of womankind everywhere, be she housewife or circus star.

It was here that an amusing incident occurred. A young woman came along with eight or ten children all about of an age under her chaperonage. Some of the boys raced madly ahead of her, intent upon inspecting the inside of two tiny tents that intrigued them. Knowing that these were the girls' "donnikers" (toilets to you), I told the young woman. She quickly gave a bird-like whistle. It was obvious that those youngsters had been carefully coached in obedience, at least for this venture into the backyard of the circus, for they wheeled at once and returned to the group, thus averting possible embarrassment for several. This year the donnikers had

acquired the appellation of "T-V"; if you'll ask me why some time you'll get a good laugh.

Here the matinee was only one hour late, and 3:15 was beginning to seem like an early show; at least so it seemed to us with the show, though no doubt the ducat holders milling about on the midway would have disagreed, particularly mothers with little children. Business here was excellent, bearing out our contention that if the circus will herald its coming with the traditional gaily-colored posters scattered for miles over the countryside it will find that Americans still love the circus.

During the quiet hour, the clouds that had drifted lazily overhead all day turned suddenly dark and ominous. The gentle breeze stiffened, and all of us feared another summer squall common to that mountain country. The old big top had several holes in it big enough for one to walk through. One of these chanced to be directly over the band wagon, and the musicians were frankly afraid that a wind storm would bring the amplifiers down on their heads. We took the precaution of moving Chief Pontiac out on the concrete runway of the air field behind the tents, well beyond the reach of poles should the circus be unfortunate enough to experience another blow-down. We all sat about visiting, but with anxious eyes cast often toward those scuttling, wind-filled clouds. Finally the storm veered away from the narrow valley and passed behind the mountains. Rain began to fall, however, and fearing the storm might prove whimsical and reverse its direction, we decided it would be wise to leave the lot. Beautiful as this lot was, it yet had a wicked approach, two very narrow, crooked roads badly gullied, which could become perilous should the rain get serious. So again we did not get to see the night performance, but by the same token again we did get a long night's sleep. During the night a heavy rain was driven by a high wind. In the morning I discovered I had chosen this particular night to leave my car window open with the result the seat was thoroughly soaked. Tsk, tsk!

As we dressed at the Edgewood Motel Tuesday morning, a train whistled. Bex flew to the window, saying, "Bet that's a circus train," although he did not actually believe it could be at 7:15 in the morning! All three sections should be in Erie by that time, but



it proved to be the second section. We drove back into the village of Youngsville for breakfast. Seeing smoke ahead, we quickly parked the car, got out the camera and light meter, and awaited the approach of the third section. After a wait of some minutes, it became apparent the smoke was not from a train, so we drove on into the village. Of course once we arrived at a point where we could not take pictures, the third section of that silvery train hove in sight. We did stop at a crossing and watched it roll by, carrying our performer friends to Erie. Except for the brakeman, engineer, and firemen all were asleep, oblivious to where they were or what the hour. We breakfasted, wondering if today we would have a matinee, and then drove through a chilly rain to Pennsylvania's only port on the Great Lakes, the city of Erie.

We discovered Ringling was actually to play the suburb of Kearsarge on an old airport, so we registered at a motel not too distant from the lot. We were interested in that name "Kearsarge," as it was the name of the ship on which Sverre served all through World War I and for a year thereafter. A kerosene torch stood in front of our motel, at the intersection of two streets, indicating a turn for the circus trucks and animals. Railway circuses always place a torch to indicate a turn must be made. This is known as "torching the road," a simple device that greatly expedites finding the lot in the morning and the trains at night.

While Faye made herself comfy in a charming motel room, Sverre drove to the runs, took some pictures, took Gena and Charlie to a shopping center, and visited with several circus people. Then the Morowskis and we sauntered across the highway from our motel to a restaurant named The Chuck Wagon. In addition to serving good food this eat house featured one of the most unique and clever roadside signs we have chanced to see, an enormous covered wagon going away, drawn by two big white horses. From the rear axle dangled a big iron kettle, skillets, long iron spoon, and other cooking utensils. Across the sides of the wagon were huge letters CHUCK WAGON. With all tables filled, we sat at a counter. Gena asked the waitress how long the Chuck Wagon had been open and she replied, "Two weeks today." As we ate the rain descended in proverbial buckets. Since we had ventured forth *sans* rain garments, we could but sit and chat until this rain storm passed. Back in the comfort of our motel, Gena and I watched the latter part of the All Star baseball game, while the men went out to the lot to see what was transpiring there. They found the circus crews struggling valiantly to get equipment onto a quagmire and to get the various poles and properties properly spotted. It was all too obvious that once again there could be no matinee. The second and third sections did not get in until around noon, and it was a nine mile haul from the runs to the lot. Sverre drove Charlie back to the cars that he might put groceries and supplies away in their stateroom. They then called for us at the motel and together we drove to the lot. There was no possibility of driving on to the lot itself because of the mud which the cats and tractors had churned into a soupy mess a foot or more deep. We parked as near as feasible, donned boots and rain coats (the latter as wind breakers, for the rain had ceased and a chill wind had taken over), and picked our way, Indian file, along the edge of a wheat field for perhaps half a mile. We negotiated the lot without mishap and found no seat wagons yet open. This meant we had no chairs, but we espied the flag up on the cook house. Gena, Charlie, and I gingerly picked our way to it through rivulets of mud. Bex elected to take more pictures of the setting up in this sea of mud, so ate later at the "grease joint," the concession wagon in the backyard which serves rolls

and sandwiches, cakes and coffee to circus personnel. The cook house meal was up to the usual high standards and was doubly appreciated that dismal afternoon. We emerged from this tent to find the sun shining, but a chill wind prevailed and our rain coats were welcome. Still no access to chairs, so Gena and I sat together on a prop box in the big dressing tent and chatted idly. There was considerable discontent being expressed by the various ones sitting and standing about, discontent with the haphazard manner things were going on the show due to inadequate management. We sensed that behind these expressions of discontent there lurked the fear the show could not long remain on the road, an eventuality that would spell trouble for every man and woman in the organization.

Finally at 8 o'clock Morowski's wagon was spotted and unlocked, and once again we could enjoy our chairs. It was too late for anyone to do laundry or other chores although the show could not open until 9:30, so we all sat about visiting as we would in our own yard at home. Amazingly the circus could not accommodate the crowds that clamored for tickets, and several hundred had to be turned away. Straw was put down around the hippodrome track, and a goodly number of men, women, and children sat on this without apparent complaint to watch the circus stars hide their worries and fears behind a splendid performance. We stood near one of the exits to watch the performance through the Ringling Rock and Roll number. It was then midnight, and we drove Charlie and Gena the nine miles to the runs. They declined our invitation to go with us to find an eat house, because their son Emerich was waiting for them in their stateroom aboard the train, and they were tired and mayhap discouraged. We found an excellent diner (completely finished in stainless steel and Formica with rest rooms, air conditioner, and all) operated by a young couple who worked quickly and quietly. Having seen luscious strawberries all along our route and noting on the menu the item "Fresh fruit in season," I ordered strawberries. Imagine my surprise to be served with canned berries! But they were cold, and I was hungry, so no need for complaint. Back to our motel and sweet slumber at 2 o'clock A.M.

The next morning we learned that some of the people leaving the circus at 1:30 slipped in that gumbo sea, fell, and picking themselves up discovered they closely resembled the black jersey clad dancers in the Ringling Rock and Roll number. Our landlord's

Three people in Rock and Roll wardrobe. Batavia, New York. July 6, 1956.





wife was one of these, but we heard no word of complaint from her. She thought the show was excellent. The Erie papers were less complacent and their reviews were not flattering. Wanting to get a colored slide of the unique Chuck Wagon sign we decided to have breakfast there. The picture fools those of our friends who have seen it projected on our screen, so realistic is it that they mistake it for an actual chuck wagon of the western prairies lost in the environs of a big city.

This Wednesday was a beautiful sunny day, warm but with low humidity and a refreshing breeze. Our destination was Meadville, which we understood had not had the Ringling Circus for forty years, so all were filled with anticipation of a good old fashioned circus day. We drove thirty-five miles of pretty country in a little over one hour, arriving shortly after 11 o'clock. We rode around the city, mailed cards, letters, and films at the post office, bought some fresh fruit, and finally drove to the railway station to see how things were progressing with the circus trains. Bex found a good vantage point from which to take pictures, and I sat in the car parked in the shade and read in our AAA guide book about Pennsylvania. I was interrupted by an irate, red-haired woman whose car was parked in front of ours. She was indignant that we had parked behind her. From habit Bex had taken our car keys with him, so I could not oblige her by moving the car. I tried to assure her that she had ample space in which to maneuver (in Madison it would have looked wasteful), but she protested vehemently. However she did readily extricate her car. Because I had noted that she had parked closer to the car ahead of her than we had to hers, I found the situation a bit amusing. Perhaps she resented a Wisconsin car occupying space on a street maintained by Pennsylvania taxpayers and forgot that tourists do pay their way.

When Bex returned to the car he reported that the crews were having a difficult time unloading the equipment due to crowded yard conditions. In trying to maneuver the center pole wagon out of the yards a crossing sign was torn down, and things in general were chaotic. One of the yard men remarked to Bex that the show might as well spend this Wednesday setting up and repairing sadly worn equipment, and give two performances on time on Thursday since they were not going to be able to show in Youngstown, Ohio on Thursday anyway. A faith healer-evangelist had erected tents upon the grounds and refused to move them. We bought Meadville and Youngstown papers and read that the evangelist was in possession of the lot but that Ringling had a prior contract, so another element of suspense was introduced into an atmosphere already redolent with uncertainties!

Two o'clock had crept upon us unawares, and we had not as yet found a motel for the night, so we headed for the outskirts of the city where our AAA book indicated a good hostelry. Out in open country we were held up by a railway crossing flasher, and there stood the third section of silvery cars. Bex took some pictures and decided to wait for the train to pull across the highway that he might get some of it negotiating a curve. We waited until close to 3 o'clock and gave up. We drove on to the Wagon Wheel Motel, an excellent one with very modest rates. We unpacked, tidied up a bit, and drove perhaps a half mile down the highway for chow.

Arrived at the lot about 4 o'clock, having tarried on a long, high bridge long enough to take some pictures of the Ringling trains parked below. The road to the lot was a narrow, tortuous one, and at one point we had to back up a considerable distance to let opposing traffic through. The grade was steep, as were the ditches alongside the highway. Seat wagons were stranded here and there, and two cats were unable to budge some of them. Number 19 was tipped over and in trying to right it, the fifth wheel (which is

mounted horizontally above the front axle and serves as a pivot in turning) and front axle were pulled out! The lot itself was comprised of a strip of high land, on which were spotted the cook house, commissary wagon, etc., and a hollow swale where the big top was being erected!! We heard that the spec floats were stranded at various points along the route.



The pay off float in spec. Elmira, New York. July 14, 1956. This was the first of that the show would three days without a big top. We joined be given sans seats. the show that day for a few days with it.

To the best information available to us, this is the first time in the seventy-two years Ringling Bros. Circus have been on the road that a performance has been given without seats. Straw was put down on one side, where the ground was a little soggy, and the spectators on the other side had to content themselves with sitting on the grass. A long, low truck, designed to haul the heavy cat over city streets, plied back and forth between the lot and the various stranded wagons fetching such props as were most essential for what had to be a curtailed performance. There were no lights in the dressing tent because they did not succeed in hooking up the cables with the dynamo, so artists improvised dressing tables in the open and applied make-up while yet the sun shone. Dozens of performers had to locate the stranded seat wagon that housed their trunks and fetch such items as they needed to ready themselves for the show. Wardrobe, of course, is housed in the wardrobe tent, and those wagons being less heavy than the seat wagons had been spotted. Cats had to push and pull the water wagon about the backyard, so there was only one service this day and no laundry was done. The big oil truck from a local dealer had to be pulled about in a similar manner as it supplied trucks and tractors with gasoline.

A big crowd milled about the lot all afternoon, and many the laments we heard as people who had waited forty years for the Greatest Show on Earth grew fearful they would not get to see a performance after all. Think of it, two generations of children in Meadville had never seen this circus in their home town and most of them had never seen it anywhere. For days and weeks young and old had planned for this day of days, so it is not difficult to imagine the disappointment of literally thousands. But there were men coming home after a day's work for whom dinners had to be prepared. There were baby sitters engaged for the afternoon who had plans of their own for the evening. There were little children who grew too weary and became irritable. There were no rest rooms or lunch counters near the lot. Thus a combination of many factors lead many hundreds to ask for refunds and a ticket window had to be opened for this purpose. Thus money which the circus so much needed to meet its obligations had to be given back to disappointed patrons.

Finally at 6:50 the matinee was under way with some 3500 spectators seated on grass or straw or standing to watch the belated



performance. We visited for a time, enjoying the uninhibited performance of Trevor Bale's eleven-year-old daughter as she mimicked various artists she had seen in the movie *The King and I*. The Alzana troupe could not work, and Harold and his wife expressed a desire to go into the city and see a movie. So about 7:30 we drove them to the theater. We found cars bumper to bumper heading for the circus lot. It occurred to us to clock these on our speedometer and found they extended in an unbroken line for over five miles, and that was only along the route we drove. Doubtlessly it was true of other avenues of approach to the lot. They were destined to either wait until about 9:30 for the night performance or forego seeing the show for which they had so long waited. We learned the next day that better than 6500 did attend.

After leaving the Alzanas we went to our motel and cleaned up a bit, then drove to a nearby eat house for dinner. The restaurant we chose was less attractive externally than the one where we had lunched a few hours earlier, but its food was much superior. One can't always judge by appearances. Returning to the motel we met with the only near-accident we have experienced in all our circus trips through the years. Darkness was gathering, and a line of cars was traveling toward us, all with headlights burning--all except one! It was in the lead and invisible to us until, just as we started to turn into the motel drive, it suddenly bore down upon us. Bex's reflexes were instantaneous and he returned to our lane of traffic. Fortunately the driver of the unlighted car acted with the same speed and turned onto the shoulder of his lane, thus avoiding what might have been a serious if not a fatal head-on collision. We wondered if it occurred to him that his failure to have headlights burning was responsible. We retired about 10 o'clock. Never have we had so many nights of normal hours of sleep on our circus jaunts.

At 8 o'clock Thursday, July 12 we pulled away from the Wagon Wheel Motel in a cool rain. We were no longer in the mountains, but the country was hilly and beautiful. An hour later we were hungry and parked our car near the Hotel Humes in Mercer, Pennsylvania. It was obviously a hostelry that had served several generations of wayfarers. The dining room had the charm of another era, and the food was delicious. The rain was conducive to leisurely breakfasting, and we tarried to address more postals to friends. A lull in the rain encouraged us to return to our car and about 10 o'clock we left Pennsylvania and entered Ohio. The countryside became even more like our own here in south-central Wisconsin. An hour later we registered at the Tower Motel in Youngstown, sixty-two miles west of the Wagon Wheel. This was again a home away from home and each day we became greater devotees of motels. The day had grown warm and humid, with the threat of rain still with us. A Howard Johnson's restaurant was near by and we enjoyed a light lunch.

Curious to learn how the "debate" between the evangelist and the circus had terminated, we drove to the lot early. The faith healer had struck his tents, if not his colors, and workmen were busy erecting the dark blue big top of the circus. The lot was tight, but there was a parking lot just across the highway. I remained for a time in the car, which afforded me a "ring side" seat to watch the setting-up, always a fascinating performance in itself. I think it was *Fortune* magazine that some years ago wrote that the greatest show on earth is Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, and the second greatest show on earth is the moving of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. Alas, the superb efficiency that caused *Fortune's* writer to marvel at the organization of this greatest of outdoor amusement enterprises was not in evidence this season. However, as one watched those loyal but leaderless workmen struggle to get everything in its proper place one still found admiration for



Big top & horses. Warren, Pennsylvania. July 9, 1956. This was the big top flown up from Sarasota after the blow down.

the common man. There was no room on the lot to permit the maneuvering necessary to spot the seat wagons, so these were first hauled to the rear of "our" parking lot and left near the cookhouse until such time as the tent could be made ready for them. Several loads of gravel had to be hauled on to the lot to build roads to support the circus's heavy equipment. At 2:40 I watched the first of the heavy seat wagons pulled across the highway by a big tractor. Others followed in order. At 3 o'clock I joined Gena in the backyard and we sat with other artists on a cable drum. The usual chit chat was studded with frequent comments that revealed the increasing concern engendered by the almost daily delay in setting up the show. About 5 o'clock Gena and I braved rain and mud to go across the road to the cookhouse. The rain ceased about 5:30 and returning to the lot we found the wagon open and our chairs available.

During the 1953 and 1954 seasons we enjoyed the company of the only Norwegian performer it has ever been our pleasure to know on the Ringling Show, Tell Tiegen. We were delighted to see him on the lot in Youngstown during the quiet hour. He was playing in Pittsburg with the Tom Packs Circus and journeyed over for a brief visit with former colleagues on the Big One. Proudly he showed us his immigrant visa. Like so many circus artists, having tasted life in this great rich, broad, beautiful, free land of ours, he wants to become a citizen. He had returned to his native land that he might re-enter this country on an immigrant instead of a performer's visa. Most of these people make better citizens than do we native born Americans because they value that which we take for granted. Never having known the deprivations and lack of personal freedom of humans in many countries in this world we cannot treasure these rights as do those who come from other lands. And what gifts of character and culture these naturalized citizens have lavished upon our civilization! Another visitor from the Tom Packs Circus was Rusty Parent who received her first training in horsemanship from our very good friend, Nellie Dutton, circus star of the generation now gone from the center ring.

At 6:15 little Jimmy Armstrong sounded first bugle, followed almost immediately by the second bugle, the signal that the time had arrived to put on make-up and don wardrobe for the 6:50 matinee. We enjoyed this "afternoon" show. The night one began at 10:10 and we sat through it until the Ringling Rock and Roll number when we left to drive Gena to the runs. They played that night to a turn-away crowd. Who says Americans have lost their love of the circus?

Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> found us under way shortly after 9 o'clock in a cool drizzle. Just before reaching the Ohio turnpike we stopped for breakfast at the Town House Motel Restaurant and had superb food. The honeydew melon must have grown in paradise. The



restaurant had been open only seven weeks but was Duncan Hines endorsed! The rest rooms were equipped with beautiful grey fixtures, roll-down linen towels, soap in dispensers that worked, and hot water. We entered the turnpike at 10 o'clock, and what a change from the lovely winding, often rather narrow, mountain roads we had been driving. And what a difference in the speed one drives these broad, gently curving ribbons of concrete! Exactly one hour and fifty-six miles later we left the turnpike to drop south to Akron where we were to spend our last day with Ringlings. The motel between Cuyahoga Falls and Akron was filled this year, as last, when we sought accommodations there well before noon. It seems that race horse enthusiasts keep it filled during a long season. Informed of motels out of Akron on Highway 18, we drove through the city and for many miles, out through Montrose, a beautiful suburb with massive, well-kept estates, but nary a motel did we see. We reversed our direction and eventually came to a tourist court. This did not appeal to us, so we drove back toward the turnpike where we had earlier seen several motels, and there found good accommodations, farther from the lot than we liked but nearer the turnpike which was to be our highroad of the morrow.

Over the car radio came the news, "Several cars of the Ringling-Barnum Circus were derailed en route from Youngstown. The first section did not arrive until 10:30, and the others should be in about noon."

"What next?" we asked in unison; "we've seen everything now except the show's closing." It proved to be that only one flat car had been derailed, but that was sufficient to delay the arrival several hours.

After lunch, we did a little shopping in one of the big department stores, and then drove the familiar route to the lot, out past Derby Downs and the Rubber Bowl, to the airport. Here the old struggle was in progress to erect the big top and all the other tents that comprise this canvas city. The lot was firm, level, and grassy, with plenty of room in which the cats and trucks could maneuver, but again the matinee was cancelled!

We had looked forward to seeing in Akron our very dear friend Eddie Jackson, who retired two years ago after spending a long life with various circuses, the latter ones in the advertising department of the Big One. Eddie knows circus from A to Z, is very fair in his evaluation of men and situations, and is a veritable encyclopedia of information about American circuses, big and little, of the last seventy years. As we had expected, we found him sitting quietly in the lee of a tent, surrounded by circus folk and fans. Eddie was sad as he watched the efforts to ready the show for a single performance. One of the executives remarked that it was the eight mile haul which had necessitated the cancellation of the matinee, but Eddie and the rest of us knew that last summer the show had the same haul to the same lot and not only gave the matinee at 2:15, but the night show at 7 o'clock, as was the policy last season for Sunday night performances. Last year it was under the direction of seasoned circus men. Here, too, we greeted another fine circus fan, Carl Elwell, but were sad to learn that his gracious wife, who has shared his circus hobby through the years, could not come to the lot this year because of arthritis and the need to remain at home and care for a sick sister. We know with what gallantry she renounced this day on the lot. Gerald Harshman of Salem was again on the lot and we enjoyed "circusing" with him. Bex took some pictures including several of a U.S. Navy dirigible that hovered over the lot, dipping occasionally to within a few feet of earth.

This was pay day for the performers, their last full one this season.



Harold Alzana doing a one hand stand on high wire in open air. Elmira, New York. July 2, 1956.

The night show went on time to a straw house. Since this was to be our last night, we elected to sit about the back yard and visit with various the circus folk. Evelyn Kent, the blond British girl who reminds us of Helen Wallenda in appearance, told us some of the details of the blow-down in Geneva the night before we "joined out." Harold Alzana expressed the opinion the nylon cord used in the big top this year sags and that it was this that had permitted the wind to get beneath that great spread of canvas and wreak such havoc. That talented bareback rider, Jefta Loyal, sat with us for an hour telling us how the life of the circus artist has changed in the last generation. We remarked that her comments were in agreement with those of two of the greatest riders of the last generation, Rose Dockrill and her husband, George Holland, who now live in quiet retirement in the little town of Darien, Wisconsin. Jefta's eyes brightened and she said, "Why I have a letter Rose Dockrill once sent to us telling us how pleased they had been to watch us ride because we exhibited the type of artistry they admire to see in bareback riders. I shall keep that letter always, for I know what great stars those two were in their day." We told her that Rose Dockrill's mother, known in the circus world as Mme. Dockrill, was considered by many critics to be the greatest bareback rider of all time, and that her daughter, Rose, still a beautiful and charming woman, was a worthy heir to a great tradition.

The time came as always it must to bid farewell to our many friends, to stash our chairs back in the Pontiac, and to pull off the lot and head back into the city of Akron. Being in a sentimental mood, we elected to eat at Clark's where last year we were guests of [circus fan] Harper Joy. We had talked that night of the plight of our beloved circus, and now we recalled that Harp had remarked that perhaps our god had feet of clay. Our fears had been the same but until that evening each of us had been reluctant to put



them into words. Once the words had been uttered we three lovers of this once magnificent amusement enterprise hastened to reassure one another that what we so deeply feared surely would not come to pass, the wish father to the thought. We could not quite visualize our lives without this towering giant of circusdom, the sun about which revolved the firmament of American circuses, the sheet anchor of the circus world.

Saturday morning we left our motel in a cool, misty rain at 8:15 E.S.T., breakfasted in one of the well supervised restaurants on the turnpike, and left the turnpike exactly four hours and one-hundred seventy-five miles later. We had out-driven the rain and the day had become warm and humid, but not oppressively so. At 1 o'clock our time (C.S.T.) we had lunch at a roadside eat house in Indiana, where patrons were invited to leave their cards on a big bulletin board, and being nearly typical Americans we followed suit. Nothing like conformity! From 1:30 to 4:30 we listened on the car radio to the Braves-Bums baseball game and thrice enjoyed it since "we" won. The Milwaukee Braves are really the Wisconsin Braves, you know, and never were there more rabid fans of the national game. About 3:45 we left Indiana behind and entered our sister state, Illinois. The drive via the outer drive in Chicago was very pleasant, for we were late enough to avoid the heavy traffic. Lake Michigan is always beautiful, whatever its mood, and this summer afternoon was in a gentle one, and thousands of people were enjoying its shores and waters. Dinner near the state line at 6 o'clock; a stop at a roadside market between Milwaukee and

heard the news between shows; by 10 o'clock that night we were all in a state of shock and still are."

Since, we have been constantly importuned by literally hundreds to give the reason for what is universally considered a disaster. "Is it true that TV closed 'your' circus?" "Was the weather to blame?" "Couldn't they get lots any more?" "Was business bad?" One question has not been asked. No one has asked, "Is America weary of the circus?" That question simply does not occur to circus loving Americans who recognize that it is the one amusement in this country which has never required a censor. How often, oh how often we have heard the comment, "That circus didn't really belong to the Ringlings, you know; it belonged to the children of America." It is in thoughts like these, oft repeated, that lies the great hope that the Greatest Show on Earth may yet follow the tanbark trail across this broad, fertile, fun-loving country of ours again.

It is our considered judgment that mismanagement alone is responsible for the show's closing. TV hurt six, seven, eight years ago when it was a novelty, but we believe it is no longer a serious competitor and might actually be used as a clever and persuasive advertising medium by the show. For many summers we have spent our vacations with Ringling Bros. in various parts of this continent and never have we seen better business than we saw during those fateful final weeks this season. Crowds greeted it everywhere, and they played to excellent houses despite late arrivals, cancelled performances, and huge refunds. As for long hauls, we

have seen these for the past twenty years, and the show has seldom been very late for a matinee and seldom, indeed, cancelled a performance because of a long haul. Rain today surely does not constitute the handicap it did in the years when it depended upon horses for power and moved over unpaved or poorly paved roads and streets. Today it has tremendous mechanical power at its command and probably never has to use a dirt road.

An organization cannot decimate its managerial staff, heed the advice of Hollywood and Broadway "sirens" whose first love surely is not the circus, engage non-circus executives at high

salaries, and hold its workmen in contempt and expect to survive.

Let it be hoped that just as the management learned, almost too late, that it could not abandon traditional circus advertising, it may learn that it requires men steeped in circus tradition, and familiar with circus methods and techniques, and imbued with that loyalty which is peculiar to Spangleland, that it requires these to move and maintain the Greatest Show on Earth. Let it be hoped that the management will recognize that it is but the trustee for the children's own especial amusement—The Greatest Show on Earth.



Cat pushing water wagon. Erie, Pennsylvania. July 12, 1956.

Madison for groceries; about 9:30 back at White Tops and our beloved Waubesa Beach!

Three days later came the news: RINGLING-BARNUM CIRCUS CLOSES. All last season we had half expected this, and with the show its final two weeks we had seen it literally dying. Yet those blaring headlines left us stunned and sick at heart. A letter from a friend on the show a few days later read, in part, "We first



# The Flying Fishers of Bloomington, Illinois

By Steve Gossard

The Fisher Bros.  
Fred Miltmore

Any discussion of the Fisher Brothers or the Flying Fishers troupes of Bloomington, Illinois should begin with reference to Clyde Noble's article "The Man on the Flying Trapeze" in the September-October 1950 issue of *White Tops*. At that time Noble had been retired from trapeze performance for over thirty years. Although some of his claims for Bloomington aerialists were based on hearsay and conjecture, most of his account was well founded. He had first-hand knowledge of the activities of Bloomington's professional circus community from the turn of the century. He recorded a general chronology of Bloomington performers and their activities during that period. The thrust of the article focused on his claim that a Bloomington man named Fred Miltmore (variously spelled Miltmore or Miltmore) had been inspired with the idea of introducing a catcher with a trapeze act, and that he had invented the distinctive performance called the "flying return act" in this city. Thus he claimed that Bloomington was the original home of "the man on the flying trapeze." According to this account, Miltmore had teamed up with Clyde's brother, Charles Noble, and together they formed an act called the "Fisher Brothers."

Though Clyde Noble no doubt believed these claims, in fact, the Fisher Brothers' act was originated by an aerialist named William Fisher, and Miltmore later inherited the act from him. Incidentally, the song *The Man on the Flying Trapeze* was composed in 1867, some years before Fred Miltmore entered the profession, and was unrelated to anyone in Bloomington.

Although traces of circus activity in Bloomington have been found from as early as 1858,<sup>1</sup> Bloomington circus history virtually began in 1871 with Fred Miltmore, the first performer to

Ringling Bros. Circus poster showing the Flying Fishers. Witte Museum, Hertzberg collection.



Fisher brothers 1898. Fred Miltmore, Henry Franz and Charles Noble. Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections.

leave Bloomington to join a traveling circus. According to his own account, he joined out with a circus at Farmer City, Illinois in 1871. It may be more accurate to say that he ran away from home, for he was only 16 years old at that time. Though no circus has yet been found performing at Farmer City in 1871, there is no reason to doubt Fred's claim on this point. It bears mentioning that Older's Grand Museum Circus showed in Bloomington in September of that year, and advertisements for the show appeared in the local newspaper picturing the Senyah's aerial act performing what was called a "leap for life," using a flyer and a catcher.<sup>2</sup>

Fred's father, Horace Miltmore, was listed in the 1870-1871 Bloomington city directory as a "traveler," residing at 508 Taylor Street. In the 1872-1873 directory he was listed as a "sewing machine agent," residing at W. North 17 Cox's Row. In other words, Horace was a traveling salesman. His death was recorded in the *Bloomington Daily Pantagraph* of April 30, 1875. It was said that he had been "in the hedge business, and again in the sewing machine trade." His age was "about fifty." The cause of death was asthma. Information provided by Fred's relatives, Delores Boyd and Graeme Miltmore in 2005 states that Fred had two younger twin brothers, named William and Albert, who also performed with the circus. Little is known about them, but it was said that they were born in



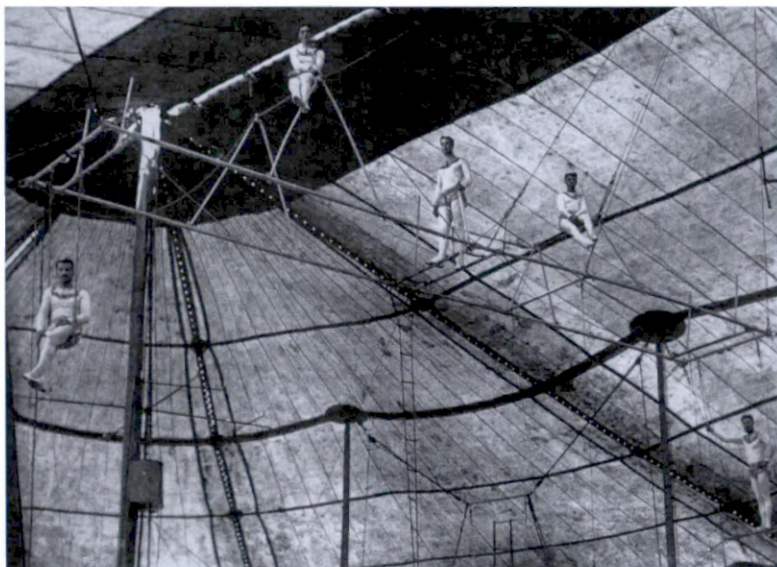
Peoria, Illinois, and at the age of twenty-two the Miltmore twins both relocated to Memphis to work in the confection business. William eventually became the manager of the Oliver Finnie Company, a candy and grocery business. Albert later moved to Cincinnati,

#### William Fisher

Fred Miltmore is not heard from again until 1875, when he was listed with the acrobats, leapers and tumblers with Maxwell and Smith's Great Western Sensation. Also on the roster of acrobats was W. Fisher, no doubt the same William Fisher who later formed the act that would be called the Fisher Brothers. During his career William Fisher specialized in contortions and trapeze work. Though Clyde Noble would later state that the name Fisher Brothers was inspired by Fred Miltmore's use of a fisherman's net for safety, the historical record does not support this claim. Clyde's assertion that the Fisher Brothers had been the first to use a net with a trapeze act is also in error. The Hanlon Brothers had used a net with their aerial acts as early as 1860.<sup>3</sup>

William Fisher may have been related to a performer named George Fisher, who was performing a double trapeze act as early as 1874 with a partner named Abe W. Gookin. Fisher and Gookin later joined Eugene Marteneze to form an act called the "Three Dumonts." It is important to note that the Three Dumonts performed an act called "*L'eschelle Perilleuse*," (with various spellings). A team of brothers named the Hanlons originated this act, possibly as early as 1860. The *L'eschelle* act employed a rigging that resembled a ladder. Aerialists turned tricks as they swung from one rung of the ladder to another. As time went on "casters" were employed hanging by the hocks from the rungs of the ladder to toss the aerialist (called a "flyer" or "leaper") between themselves. The act that came to be called a "casting act" began in this way. This is likely the first act to employ casters, or catchers. It was first performed by the Hanlon Brothers, and the Dumonts act was an early copy of this performance.<sup>4</sup>

The Flying Fishers on Barnum & Bailey. Ringling Art Museum, Glasier Collection.



A page from the 1898 Ringling Bros. courier showing Fishers. Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections.

At any rate, W. C. Fisher and F. T. Miltmore were again listed with the Great Western Circus in 1876. Miltmore must have become acquainted with William Fisher at this time, but as yet they did not form a partnership. In 1878 a brothers act called "Fisher and Ryan" were working together as gymnasts for the New York Circus, and "Miltmore and Berry" were performing trapeze and tumbling acts for the Dan Rice Circus. No one named Fisher was listed performing on the Rice show roster that year. Obviously, William Fisher and Fred Miltmore were not working together. They were working on different shows. Up to this point William Fisher was working with other partners, probably doing acrobatic work, and the Fisher Brothers act did not yet exist.<sup>5</sup>

In 1879, William Fisher formed his aerial act for the first time, calling it the "Fisher Brothers." The Fisher Brothers were not performing trapeze at this time, but were listed doing stationary horizontal bar work. William's other act, "Fisher and Rearick," performed a tumbling act described as "America's Greatest tumblers and champion double somersault throwers." They were working for Hilliard, Hunting and Demott's Great Pacific Circus. Miltmore's name has not been found on any circus roster listed with



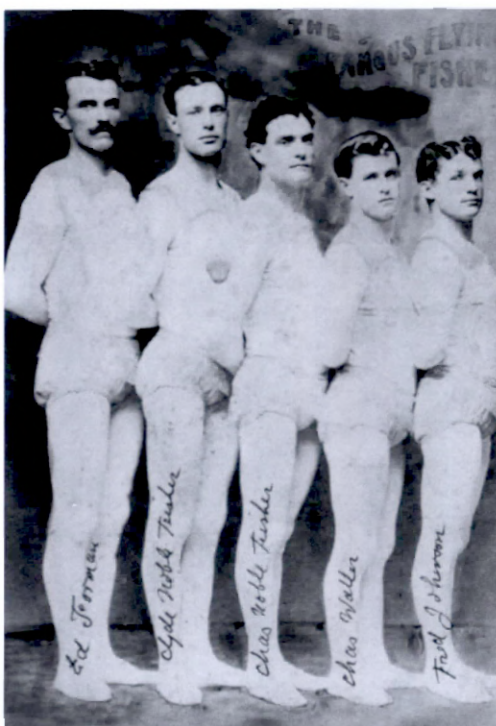
the *New York Clipper* that year, and neither Miltmore nor Fisher were found listed in 1880. They may have been working on the variety stage. In the 1880s the Miltmore family apparently relocated to Quincy, Illinois. The *Quincy Daily Herald* of May 29, 1881 (courtesy of Delores Boyd) states that Fred's brothers, William and Albert, and an "L. Miltmore" had taken part in a walking race in that city on behalf of their employer, the Clark and Morgan Company.<sup>6</sup>

The 1904 act, Left to right Ed Foreman (LaMar), Clyde Noble (Fisher), Charles Noble (Fisher), Charles Waller and Fred Johnson. Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections.

The Fisher Brothers advertised for work in the *New York Clipper* of March 19, 1881, the "brothers" consisting of "Wm., and Sam'l." This "Sam'l" was Sam Roemer, who remained with William Fisher the following year. The Fisher Brothers were reportedly leaving a stage show combination called "The Pathfinders" in March to join Welsh and Sands' Circus in Houston, Texas. They went on to perform for the William Main show that season. Advertising again for work in the *New York Clipper* of October 15, they worked through the winter on the variety circuit.<sup>7</sup>

Miltmore and Fisher again came together in 1882. Fred Miltmore performed as a leaper for the William Main Circus in June of that year, and the Fisher Brothers returned to the Main show as well. The Fishers advertised for work August 12 and 19, performing "Brother-act and double bars. Double somersaults done in both acts." They claimed to be the "undisputed double somersault throwers of the world." "Sam Fisher," the advertisement said, was "the funniest of all clowns. The only clown doing double somersaults." By October, however, Sam Roemer, "late of Fisher Brothers" was advertising that he was now working with Charles Cardello doing another double somersault act. It is likely that Fred Miltmore joined William Fisher at this time. Since the Fishers are not heard from again until 1884, it is possible that William was breaking Fred in with the act during the 1883 season. Roemer formed a new partnership, and performed as "Roemer and Leroux" with Washburn and Hunting's Circus the following year.<sup>8</sup>

In 1884 the new Fisher Brothers act was listed as aerialists in the roster of the John B. Doris' Great Inter-Ocean Circus. A February 28, 1885 advertisement in the *New York Clipper* for the Fisher Brothers' Hotel in Baltimore, Maryland, at the corner of Baltimore and Market Streets specifically invited professional performers to lodge at the hotel, "Within Five Minutes' Walk of Any Theatre, and All Lines of Cars Pass the Door." It carried the endorsement of several entertainment companies. Apparently the Fisher Brothers were doing well enough for themselves that they could afford to open a hotel using their name. The Fishers were listed on the roster of the Doris show again that year, but the *Quincy Daily Whig* reported March 26 that the Fisher Brothers "will leave for Philadelphia in a few days to join Forepaugh's show" (item courtesy of Delores Boyd). In September they



opened with Comstock and Eggleston's Excelsior Minstrel show. Fred's brother, Al, was working with brothers John and Will Ahearn in horizontal bar and tumbling acts with a troupe called the "I. T. minstrels" when they performed at the Opera House in Quincy in October.<sup>9</sup>

In 1886 William Fisher left the Fisher Brothers act. He continued performing for a number of years doing contortions. Fred joined in partnership with John Ahern, who had the concessions privileges on Col. Webb's Overland Show the year before. Ahern's home was in Quincy, Illinois, where the W. W. Cole Circus had wintered during the 1870s, and a number of professional circus people still resided in that city. Fred and John called themselves "Fisher and Ahern" and were billed as "aerialists" with the John B. Doris show that year. The *Quincy Daily Whig* reported April 15 that "John Ahern and Will Miltmore will leave for Philadelphia in about a week to join the Inter-Ocean circus." This statement could be in error, but it begs the question of whether or not Fred's brother

William might have been somehow associated with the act at that time. The *Clipper* on September 25 stated that "The Fisher Brothers are performing some new and daring feats."<sup>10</sup>

The question arises as to just what kind of performance Fisher and Ahern were delivering in 1886. If Miltmore had invented the flying return act as Clyde Noble claimed, this would have been an ideal time for him to do it. Unfortunately, this could not have happened. The use of a catcher with a trapeze act had originated twenty years earlier, when Julio Buislay invented an act called the "leap for life." In this act one man served as a "catcher," and swung upside-down by his feet (or his hocks) from what was called a "catchbar," while the "flyer," or "leaper," swung out to him on a "flybar." The flyer did a trick, and the two made a hand-wrist catch. The flyer then dropped to the net, remounted the pedestal, and the team repeated the process with each trick. The complete flying return act had been performed as early as 1877 by George Edwin Algar (who called himself "Gonza") along with his protégés in England. Gonza's main innovation in creating the flying return act in 1877 was to time the trick so that the flyer could return to the flybar, and back to the pedestal; avoiding the monotony of dropping to the net each time. Most "brothers" in the 1880s, like Fisher and Ahern, were performing either a "double flying bar act" (an act which did not use a catcher) or the leap for life.

At this point the historical record becomes hopelessly obscured by confusing and apparently conflicting accounts. This may be because Fred Miltmore's brothers, William and Albert, were also working in the business, possibly taking the name of "Fisher" as well. At any rate, the confusion is compounded by the unreliability of Fred Miltmore's own account of history as we get it from Clyde Noble. We hear nothing of Fred's brothers in any of his accounts, either from Clyde's articles or from any other interview. On February 20 of that year the *Quincy Daily Whig* stated, "Messrs. Fred and Will Miltmore and Fischer left for St. Louis last evening, to fill a week's engagement at the Palace theater. They will travel with Forepaugh's circus the coming summer"





Flying Fishers in 1914. Charles Waller, Esther Musselman, Edith Musselman Waller, Thomas Beckman, and William Beck. Photo courtesy of Donald Riegger.

(item courtesy of Delores Boyd). The Fisher Bros., "flying trapeze," were listed in the *New York Clipper*, February 19, 1887 roster of the Adam Forepaugh Circus, but Fisher and Ahern, "aerialists," were listed with Doris and Colvin's Circus in April. Either Miltmore and Ahern changed shows early in the season, or another Fisher Brothers act was working at the same time. To further confuse matters, an act called "Fisher and Stone" was working with M. Curtiss' Novelty Company in February, and a team called "Fisher and Clark" was advertising for work in March of 1888. This underscores the difficulties of tracing performers who employ such common names, and much of the historical record must be laid open to interpretation. The team of Fisher and Clark were identified in a later ad as "Frank Fisher" and "Geo. Clark." If Fred had changed partners to work with George Clark he was here mistakenly called "Frank."<sup>11</sup>

The Fisher Brothers, "master Aerialists of the Universe," advertised for work in the *New York Clipper* of July 2, 1888, stating that their "incomprehensible feats in mid-air have astonished the world." They stated that they were the "two largest and heaviest Aerial Team Performing the Marvelous Feats, such as Double Somersaults, Leap for Life from the Dome of the Theatre to the hand of the brother, etc." They concluded with a \$5,000 challenge for "ANYONE TO PRODUCE THEIR EQUAL."

They were booked through the winter with Gus Hill's World of Novelties for the winter of 1888 to 1889. In the March 30, 1889 *Clipper* "Frank Fisher" and "Charles Fisher" were listed with the Pat O'Brien show when it opened in Lexington, Illinois, just twenty miles from Bloomington. Whether or not these two men had any relationship to Fred Miltmore's Fisher Brothers' act is not known. The May 18, 1889 *Clipper* reported that "The Fisher Bros., the human meteors, held the audience in suspense with their marvelous act mid air" with the Wallace & Co.'s International Three Ring Circus. The "Great Fisher Brothers" advertised August 3, 1889 that they were re-engaged as the "Flying Men of the Air" with Gus Hill's World of Novelties. They repeated their \$5,000 challenge.

The huge list of performers published in the *New York Clipper* March 15, 1890 for the Barnum and Bailey Circus included F. Fisher, but no one by the name of Clark. This may not have been Fred Miltmore, for the following year the Barnum and Bailey Circus again listed F. Fisher on the roster, but stated that he was

working a herd of trained elephants. Miltmore may have worked for the John Robinson show for part of the season in 1891. The roster published in the *Clipper* of May 9 included "the Fisher Family" as well as another act that would work along-side the Fishers in the next few years, the Da Comas. By this time Fred's brother, William, was residing in Memphis, and was listed as a "candy maker."<sup>12</sup>

An unidentified article from Clyde Noble's scrapbook stated that Fred Miltmore had a partner named Bert Ciche at one time. This must have been the "Burton Fisher" who, according to Hunting's New Railroad Shows route book, visited the show at Attica, New York on June 29, and again on July 11. It stated that Burt Fisher was working with Ben Wallace's show. The route book was likely in error, for Burt Fisher and Fred Johnson were both listed with the roster of La Pearl's Twenty-five Cent Shows that year. A Fred Johnson, of Quincy, Illinois, would later join the Flying Fishers' act. If this was the same Fred Johnson, he must have been performing at a very young age.<sup>13</sup>

A short blurb in the *Clipper* dated March 5, 1892 stated, "Fisher and Clark have dissolved partnership. Geo. Clark is now working with his wife as a partner in a new aerial act." Fred Miltmore was again working for the Walter L. Main Circus, and had teamed up with Burt Ciche. A *Clipper* article dated March 12, 1892 stated, "Burton Fisher has entirely recovered from his recent illness, and will still be one of the Fisher Bros. aerialists. They go with Walter L. Main's Circus the coming season." On August 6 it was reported that "Burt Fisher is again sick, and Fred Fisher took him home to Waterbury, Ct. He had a paralytic stroke." And on August 13: "On account of sickness of his partner, Burt, Fred Fisher was compelled to throw up his engagement, and he, with his wife and son left July 30 for Cincinnati, with the good wishes of all." It bears mentioning that an act called "The Bicketts" (William and Minnie) were with the Walter L. Main show that season, and the Bicketts were performing a flying return act.

#### Charles Noble

At some time in 1892 Fred Miltmore recruited Charles Noble for the Fisher Brothers act. Charles was one of eleven children. He had been listed in the 1886 Bloomington city directory as a clerk, residing at 666 E. Taylor Street. In 1890 he had been listed as a telegraph operator, residing at 664 E. Taylor. This address was just two blocks from the Miltmore homestead. According to his brother Clyde's article later in 1950 Charles Noble had been a telegraph operator, but had had to resign from that position because of a severe case of asthma. Of all the professions for someone with a physical disability to enter into, one wonders why Charles took up the rigorous occupation of trapeze performer.<sup>14</sup>

Noble had already had experience working with an aerial act even before he joined Miltmore. He had formed a partnership with Harry La Van (Harry Greene), in 1890. Calling himself Charles La Mar, his act with Harry was called "La Van and La Mar." The La Van and La Mar act was listed with roster of the King and Franklin show in 1891. Another act called the "La Mar Brothers" was found working with Dick's Circus [possibly Dick Sutton's Model Circus] in September of that year. This may have been Ed Foreman's act; Foreman was then calling himself Ed La Mar.

Another act called "La Mar and Anderson" was performing on the "double horizontal bars" with W. W. Hendry's New London Shows in April of 1892. An act called "De Castro and La Mar" was listed with the Lemen Brothers' Circus in the *Clipper* of October 10, 1892. Which of these La Mars was Charles Noble is not known. An unidentified article from Clyde Noble's scrapbook



quoted Fred Miltmore as stating that Charles Noble had replaced Bert Citche with the Fisher Brothers act in 1891, and though much of Miltmore's account from this article is suspect, it may be true that Charles did replace Burt Citche, but not likely before 1892 or 1893. Noble claimed in his article that the Fisher Brothers act was the first act booked with the Ringling Brothers Circus when it went out on rails. Since the Ringling circus was first carried by rail in 1890 this claim could not be true.<sup>15</sup>

It is obvious that Fred Miltmore did not invent the flying return act. Although Clyde Noble certainly must have believed this story, it is just as certain that the story is not true. This curious local legend is still repeated from time to time in the Bloomington community. The earliest photograph of the Fisher Brothers act pictures Miltmore, Charles Noble, and Henry Franz, who came from St. Louis to join the Fisher troupe. Franz is pictured with the Fisher troupe as late as 1907. Clyde Noble's article stated that Franz did not take part in the flying act, but did a separate single trapeze performance on a bar above the rigging of the flying act. When he died in St. Louis in 1940 his obituary in the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* of November 14 did not mention his circus experiences.<sup>16</sup>

### Ed La Mar

This is a good place to inject a few words about Edward Foreman's early career. According to an article in Bloomington's *Daily Bulletin* of December 30, 1910, Ed Foreman began working in the circus business in 1884. Whether he began working solo, or joined an established troupe is not known, but the question of how he came by the name "La Mar" may yield insight into how he entered the profession. Foreman might have derived the name "La Mar" from an acrobatic act called the "Lamartine Brothers" that worked with various shows from as early 1881 to as late as 1897. The Lamartines were with Vaulkingburg's United Circus in 1881. They were working theater dates in February 1882; at the Capitol Theatre in Washington, D. C., and the Criterion Theatre in Chicago in November. They were with the Sells Bros. and Barrett's Circus in 1890. It was announced that John La Martine was leaving

The Flying La Mars c.1925. Left to right Betty Philips, Velma Harvey, Harry Foreman, Ray Hendryx and Henry Robins. Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections.



the Lamartine Brothers act in 1893 to join another team. Not much more is known about these Lamartine (or La Martine Brothers; but the act was likely managed by Frank Lamar, who is found performing as a clown on the same roster as the Three Brothers La Martines on the Hummel, Hamilton and Sells show in 1897. Also, an acrobat named "Harry La Mar" was listed performing with Mansell and Gifford's minstrel troupe in 1885. Harry La Mar (now with the spelling "La Marr") was performing with Laiscell's All Star Company the following year. To confuse the historical record even more, an obituary appeared in the *Billboard* on August 25, 1934 stating that a certain, "Ernest La Marr, of the Flying La Marrs" had died at age 67 at Shelbyville, Tennessee. Foreman may have worked with Ernest, Frank or Harry La Mar (or La Marr), or he may have derived the name "La Mar" as a variation of the name "The La Van Brothers," another aerial troupe from Bloomington, Illinois.<sup>17</sup>

The Foreman residence, according to the 1886 city directory, was 902 S. Bunn Street in Bloomington. The directory indicated that Ed's mother was a widow. An act called "Peel and La Mars" was listed with the Ringling Bros.' Museum, Menagerie and Circus in 1888, but it is doubtful that this "La Mars" was Ed Foreman, since subsequent articles about his career never mentioned it.<sup>18</sup>

An article in the *Daily Pantagraph* of February 27, 1912 reported that Ed organized the La Mar troupe in 1888, and began working that year with a small wagon show titled "the Black Bros. Circus." Of this show, it was said, "Business was poor and salaries uncertain." A short blurb in the *Clipper* of March 30, 1889 reported "C. Ed. Foreman, who has been working alone lately, sprained his back at the National Theatre, this city, last week, and had to cancel his engagement. He will be around again shortly." Like many circus people in those days, Ed was probably working theater dates through the winter. The La Mar troupe next joined the E. L. Brobasco's Fair Show in 1890. An act called the "La Mar Brothers" was listed on the roster of the Ringling Brothers' show in September of 1891, and although it may possibly have been Ed's act, it is not likely; according to the *Pantagraph* article of 1912, Ed was working with the Lemen Brothers' Circus from 1891 to 1892 with a partner in an act called "De Castro and Lamar" in October of 1891, and if he entered into partnership with Charles Noble at that time, as Clyde Noble claimed years later, it must have been rather late in the season. Foreman and Noble worked as La Van and La Mar for the Lemen Brothers' Circus for two years. Ed Foreman will be heard from again in connection with the Fishers' act.<sup>19</sup>

The Fisher Brothers "and Mrs. Fred Fisher" were on the roster of the Adam Forepaugh Circus in 1893. The Three Fishers were listed in Display 7 as "Startling Gymnastic Aerial Artists," while Miss Fisher appeared in Display 4 performing "Scientific Club Swinging." In 1894 the Fisher Brothers were with the ill-fated Albert M. Wetter Circus. The *Clipper* stated that they would be "the aerial feature, and there is not the least doubt will sustain their past reputation." The Wetter show was a small but high quality wagon show that originated in Massillon, Ohio. This was the show's second season. Although Albert was touted as "the Youngest and Wealthiest Manager in the Circus World," the show went broke due to poor weather and poor attendance. The story of Albert Wetter's boyhood dream of owning a circus, its collapse, and his subsequent suicide in 1903 was chronicled by George Chindahl in *The White Tops* November-December, 1953. The Fisher Brothers, Fred and Charles, joined the Great Wallace show in 1895, June. 10 at Huntington, West Virginia when the La Van act left the show. Their performance was described for the route



book as: "The Climax of Aerial Performances by the Wonderful FISHER BROTHERS. Awe-inspiring flights through mid-air, concluding with the Flying Double Somersault and 'Leap for Life.'" In the January 18, 1896 issue of the *Clipper* Fred Fisher was listed as a member of the Showman's League of America, currently traveling with the Wallace show. In March they were listed with the Walter L. Main Circus again. About this time Charles Noble married Minnie Avarit (also spelled Averitt), of Peoria, Illinois. Minnie had been a trained nurse before marrying into the profession.<sup>20</sup>

The Fisher Brothers performed with the Ringling Brothers' Circus in 1897. A Ringling poster from that year in the Hertzberg collection pictured the Fishers aerial act along with the DaComas, and a photo of the troupe was featured in the Ringling route book. Fred Miltmore was also pictured with a group of "front door men" in the 1897 route book. The people with the act were Fred Miltmore, Charles and Minnie Noble, and Henry Franz. On January 31, 1898 the *Pantagraph* reported: "A Winter Training School: Mr. and Mrs. Charles Noble, acrobats, have been in this city for several weeks, engaged in practice. Mr. Harry Greene, professionally known as Harry La Van, and wife arrived last week and are visiting relatives. Mrs. Greene is known in the circus world as M'lle Amie. Yesterday Fred Miltmore, one of the Fisher brothers, in the arena, with his wife, arrived from Cincinnati. They will all practice new tricks at the Lake Erie round house, which has been fitted up as training quarters."

This is the earliest reference found of Bloomington people practicing through the winter in indoor facilities. Clyde Noble claimed that the early performers practiced in ice houses before the YMCA opened its facilities to the circus people in the early 1900s. An unidentified article from Clyde Noble's scrapbook published some time in 1909 stated that "In the coliseum many of the stunts that won fame and money for the Fishers were tried out on small audience of old friends and neighbors..." Fred Miltmore claimed that he had practiced in the old German Club's Turner Hall in his early years. References to Turner Hall have been found in Bloomington's *Daily Pantagraph* from as early as 1867, although the original structure was said to have been built in 1883. It was a three-story brick structure, and it housed a large auditorium that hosted such events as dress balls and gymnastic activities. The old Lake Erie round house, while spacious enough, must not have been a convenient place to practice, and was probably not used for very long.<sup>21</sup>

The Fishers were again with the Ringling show in 1898. Their photo was featured in the route book; the troupe consisting of Fred Miltmore, Charles Noble and Henry Franz. The *Daily Pantagraph* reported on the show as presented in Bloomington, August 3: "The Fishers, who in plain Bloomington language where their countless friends reside, are Miltmore, Noble and Mrs. Noble, came in for a big share of the applause."

#### Minnie Fisher

Charles' wife, Minnie Fisher, became known as an outstanding solo aerialist doing iron jaw and single trapeze. She was featured on a Ringling Brothers' poster prior to 1900. Minnie was pictured in Ringling route books in the 1890s, and was among the dressing room artists featured in a *Billboard* photo on January 16, 1937. The *Pantagraph* had this to say about her with the review of the Ringling show August 2, 1898: "Miss Minnie Fisher, who is billed as 'the human top,' took the end of a long cable in her teeth and was whirled to the top of the canvas. As the rope untwined she was spun around with cyclonic velocity. Cheers greeted her descent."



The Fisher act in 1920. Left to right Herb Fleming, Elmo Ranin, Edith Waller and Charles Waller. Author's collection.

The *Pantagraph* also reported August 28, 1898: "Illness of a Circus Artist: Mrs. Chas. Noble is lying sick at the home of a relative in Chicago, and her brother, Furniss Averitt, left here last night for her bedside. The nature or extent of her illness is not known. When Bloomington saw her hang by her jaws and swing in mid air in August with Ringling's circus she looked the picture of health. Her injury at the Lake Erie round house last winter and her steady work in one-day stands have no doubt told on her. Mr. Noble and Mr. Miltmore continue with the show."

The *Pantagraph* reported on February 14, 1900 that Minnie Noble was appearing with Shipp and Collins' Indoor Circus at the Coliseum in Bloomington, and added that "Mrs. Noble is not only a charming lady but a first class performer."

The *Billboard* published a photo of Minnie performing an iron jaw slide for life running down a cable on December 7, 1918 with a caption stating that she had been featured for three years with the John Robinson Circus. She was called "THE ORIGINAL WORLD'S GREATEST IRON JAW WOMAN."

#### The Flying Fishers

According to the Flying Fishers' letterhead, the troupe was featured on the Ringling show in 1898, 1899, 1900, 1902, 1903, 1904 and 1905. Charles' 17 year old brother, Clyde Noble, broke in as a catcher for the act in 1899, although it is not certain whether or not he worked with the troupe for a few years afterwards. Clyde served an apprenticeship from the age of 15 for watch making and engraving with the Homuth jewelry concern on the square in Bloomington, and he may have been uncertain, at first, which profession he should pursue.<sup>22</sup>

Charles and Minnie Fisher wintered in Petersburg, Illinois 1900-1901 at Edward Shipp's winter quarters. The Petersburg training facilities were well known throughout the country. Besides being the equestrian director of the Ringling Brothers Circus, Shipp had married into an extensive family of equestrians when he married Julia Lowande in the 1890s. Shipp not only provided winter quarters and practice facilities, but also presented a



winter circus at his training barn.<sup>23</sup>

The Fishers were with the Forepaugh-Sells show in 1901, 1906 and 1907. The 1901 program listed them in Display 8 as "Triple Trapeze by the renowned Fisher Trio, greatest of experts." The reference to a "triple trapeze" and "trio" of performers suggests that they were likely performing a bar to bar flying act at that time, rather than a flying return (which employs two bars); or a casting act, in which the two casters would hang from stationary cradles. At some time in the early 1900s the Fishers were again pictured on a Ringling Bros. poster, this time along with the Peerless Potters casting act. The illustration did not include Fred Miltmore. The troupe now consisted of three men and two women. The members of the troupe were not named. One of the men was Charles Noble, one of the women must surely have been Minnie Noble, one other man in the act resembles Arthur Nelson (of the well-known Nelson family of acrobats and aerialists), and the other was Henry Franz. An unidentified article from Clyde Noble's scrapbook (stated that Charles Noble had traveled with the Ringling Brothers Circus with his dog, Zammert, who had, at some time been a performing dog with the show.<sup>24</sup>



The Famous Flying Fishers, Clyde Fisher, Frank Cunliff and Freddie Johnson. Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections.

In November of 1900 Fred Miltmore took a bad fall from the trapeze while working with the Ringling Brothers' Circus at Monticello, Arkansas, and broke his hip. He retired from trapeze work and moved to Cincinnati, the winter quarters of the John Robinson Circus, to become the equestrian director for that show, remaining there for at least ten years. His photograph was featured with an article titled "Circus Season Forecast" in the March 12, 1910 *Billboard*.

The La Crosse County Historical Society of La Crosse, Wisconsin shared the following information concerning someone named Fred Fisher who died November 7, 1914: Fred Fisher is shown in the 1915 Directory living at 201 N. 3<sup>rd</sup> Street and was the proprietor of a saloon at 205 N. 3<sup>rd</sup> Street. It is interesting to

note that the La Crosse Hotel's (est. 1901) address was 201-205 N. 3<sup>rd</sup> Street.

The 1917 Directory shows a Fred H. Fischer who, at the age of 59, had died in 1914.<sup>25</sup> This was the same Fred Miltmore who had called himself Fred Fisher for so many years. An unidentified article from Clyde Noble's scrapbook stated that some years later, when playing in La Crosse, the Fishers had met with "Fred F. Fisher, proprietor of the Hotel La Crosse annex, who originated the act..." The article went on to state that "Mr. Fisher originated the novel gymnastic act in 1884, and it appeared first in the John B. Dorris (sic.) show." This, no doubt, was the origin of the erroneous legend which Clyde passed down to posterity.

In May of 1950 George Chindahl wrote to Clyde requesting information concerning the origins of the flying return act. Clyde responded, "The first return act as a return act was first produced in the early 1880's and the first return act was produced by Fred Miltmore and my brother Charles Noble and they worked under the name of the 'Fisher Brothers.' I will send you a story I have written for the local historical society for publication in a historical record of Mc Lean County..." Thus the local legend, fascinating though erroneous in many respects, was begun. The historical record relates that the flying return act was actually invented by George Edwin Algar (calling himself the Marquis de Gonza) in the 1870s.<sup>26</sup>

The personnel of the Fisher troupe changed several times during the early 1900s. As stated before, Fred Miltmore left the act in 1900. In the early years Henry Franz remained with Fisher act performing his single trapeze act on a bar mounted above the rigging of the flying act. He was pictured with Miltmore and Noble in the 1898 Ringling Brothers' route book, but he left the Fisher act sometime in the early 1900s. Henry's obituary, published in the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* of November 13, 1940, made no mention of his career as a circus flyer. According to Clyde Noble's 1950 *White Tops* article, Fred Johnson and Noble himself were recruited into the Flying Fishers act in 1904; and a casting act was added to the performance. This may have been the same Fred Johnson who had worked with Burt Ciche in 1891, and it is the first reference to Fred working with the Flying Fishers' act. Johnson was from Oklahoma City. A photograph by Fredrick W. Glasier pictures the Fisher rigging in the tent tops with the casting act rigging clearly visible, while Ed Foreman and Clyde Noble sit in the catch traps. At some time before 1906 the Fisher troupe also broke in Charles Waller of Quincy, Illinois as leaper and Ed Foreman joined the act about the same time.<sup>27</sup>

Another article from Clyde Noble's scrapbook recalled a severe storm and blowdown while with the Ringling show at Marysville, Missouri on September 19, 1905. The article claimed that 40 people were killed and "hundreds injured." Photos from Clyde's scrapbook show performers sifting through the mud for their possessions.

In 1906 Charles Noble died of a severe attack of asthma, and the troupe changed its name from the Flying Fishers to the La Mar Fisher troupe. An unidentified article from Clyde Noble's scrapbook listed the troupe as consisting of Ed Foreman, Clyde Noble, Freddie Johnson, Charles Waller and Frank Dubois. The program of the Forepaugh-Sells Circus as published in the *Billboard* of May 5, 1906 called them "The Six Flying Fishers," but the identity of the sixth performer is not known. Ed Foreman and Clyde Noble were co-owners of the act, and they were practicing at the Coliseum in Bloomington. In 1908 the Fishers were featured with the Barnum and Bailey Circus. The troupe consisted of Clyde Noble, Edward Foreman and Freddie Johnson. While with the





Charlie Fisher Troupe 1914, Jennie Ward Todd, Charlie Fisher, Edith Musselman, Alex Todd and Tom Beckman. Pfening Archives.

Ringling show Clyde Noble met Emily Vecchi of the Kaufman troupe of bicycle riders. From the age of six Emily had been involved in the entertainment business, taking dance lessons, appearing in Shakespearian plays, in pantomime and finally joining the Kaufmann troupe of trick bicyclists. They came to the United States in 1905, and were pictured in the *Billboard* of December 2 that year when they appeared at the New York Hippodrome.<sup>28</sup>

An article published by Morton Smith in *Hobbies* magazine in November, 1950 tells of Clyde and Emily's courtship while with the Ringling show. Smith stated, "...the strict rules which governed the conduct of unmarried performers of the circus at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, made their courtship difficult and perhaps more prolonged." He quoted Clyde as saying that "It was almost impossible for a young man and young lady with the show to do much courting, as it was strictly against the rules of the show... We did at least get a chance to see each other once in a while by slipping away from the lot." Emily was also under the tight scrutiny of the management of the Kaufmann bicycle troupe, since she was the star solo rider in the act. From their first meeting in 1904, their courtship was delayed by the strict etiquette of the show and the interruption of their contracts with the Ringling show. The Kaufmann contract was not renewed and Emily spent three years touring Europe while Clyde remained in America working with shows under the Ringling management. Clyde left the Flying Fishers at the end of the 1907 season, and at the end of the season in 1908 Emily left the Kaufmann troupe. She and Clyde were married November 10, 1908.<sup>29</sup>

Yet another unidentified article from Clyde Noble's scrapbook stated that the troupe La Mar was to join the Barnum and Bailey Circus in New York, and identified the personnel as Mr. and Mrs. Edward Foreman, Charles and Edith Fisher (Waller), Arthur Thompson, Harry Hatfield and Charles Thrall. The article stated that this would be the fourth season that the troupe would work with the Barnum and Bailey show, after which Charles and Edith would join Leo Hendryx (at that time with the Sells Floto Circus with the Flying Lafayettes) to play the vaudeville circuit. This must have been for the 1910 season, since the La Mar Fisher troupe had worked with the Forepaugh Sells show until 1907.

The Fishers and the Flying La Vans were featured with the Adam Forepaugh and Sells Brothers Circus in 1911, under the Ringling brothers' management. Ed La Mar and Charles Waller had split their act at that time.

### Edward Foreman and the Troupe La Mar

This is a good place to catch up on the activities of Ed Foreman after his partnership with Charles Noble in 1891 and through his participation in the Flying Fishers act in the early 1900s. An article chronicling the La Mar troupe's activities from 1888 to 1912 was published in the *Daily Pantagraph* on February 27, 1912. Since working with Charles Noble in 1891, the La Mar troupe had worked on the Lemen Brothers Circus again in 1892, with the Sells Brothers' Circus in 1893. Edward had worked as equestrian director with the W. B. Reynolds show out of Rockford, Illinois in 1894. The La Mars worked with the Hall and McFlinn shows from 1895 to 1897. Foreman did not work for the two years of 1898 and 1899 because of poor health, but returned again as equestrian director in 1900, this time with the F. J. Taylor shows of Creston, Iowa. Apparently Foreman joined the Fisher troupe in 1901, because the *Pantagraph* article stated that the La Mars worked on the Ringling show from 1901 until 1905, then worked with Barnum and Bailey from 1908 to 1912. No mention was made as to what the La Mars were doing in 1906 and 1907. In 1908 or 1909 Ed's nephew, Harry Foreman, joined the act, calling himself Harry La Mar. In 1909 the LaMar troupe was made up of Ed Foreman, Charles Waller and wife, Arthur Thompson, Harry Hatfield and Charles Thrall. They were listed with the Ringling Brothers' Circus as a casting act in the same display as the Imperial Viennese Troupe and Charles Siegrist's troupe, the Six Neopolitains. This was the largest flying act performance that had ever been assembled up to that time.<sup>30</sup>

The *Pantagraph* article was correct, as far as it went, but the circus columns of the *New York Clipper* provided more detail. In 1893 Ed was listed with the Sells Brothers Circus working with the team of Petit, Mc Vey and La Mar. The team of Thomas Petit and Charles E. Mc Vey is found working as early as 1885 Wallace & Co's Menagerie, Circus and Novelty Company.<sup>31</sup> They advertised in the January 21, 1888, *New York Clipper*: "Notice, Circus Managers. Petit and Mc Vey, America's Greatest Aerial Artists, introducing one of the greatest flying aerial acts now before the public, introducing somersaults, single, one-and-a-half and doubles. We return on every trick and finish with leap for life. Also do double horizontal bars, leaps and tumbling. Address Petit and McVey, Zanesville, Ohio."

They worked with Hunting's Circus in 1892. That year Mc Vey died as a result of a fall from the trapeze, June 27. Ed La Mar joined the team in 1893, with James Stitt taking the place of Mc Vey with the new act. Circus historian C. G. Sturtevant suggested that Thomas Petit may have invented the double stationary aerial bar performance about 1891 while working with the team of Petit, Mc Vey and Foster with the Sells Brothers' Circus.<sup>32</sup>

A bar performer named George La Mar is found working with the Sig. Sautelle shows in 1894, and someone named Charles La Mar was noted with Fred Locke's Shows that same year. This may have been the same "La Mar" who was listed on the roster of the Barnum and Bailey show in 1895, and with the team of Leonard and La Mar with the George Burch New Sensation Show in 1896. It is not known whether George La Mar had any connection with Ed Foreman, but it is possible that they may have been partners in Ed's early years. At any rate, one can take the rest of the 1912 *Pantagraph* article at face value. Ed Foreman's nephew, Harry Foreman, joined the troupe in 1908 or 1909, depending on the source. Harry worked only one year in his uncle's act before joining the Gilmore troupe. Years later Harry recalled how he had gotten the job with Gilmore. "I wrote to them that I could do three kinds of double somersaults. I couldn't do any but I learned all three in a week..."<sup>33</sup>



"THE LA TROUPE LAMAR" appeared on the Barnum and Bailey Circus in display 16 in 1910 along with the Imperial Viennese Troupe (the Siegrist Silbon act) and the Six Neopolitains (Charles Siegrist troupe). The La Mar troupe was described as: "Startling feats of skill and sureness upon the lofty flying swings. A company of absolutely fearless performers, who defy the laws of gravitation and fly like winged birds across the dome of the arena or are tossed from hand to hand and from swing to swing like human rubber balls. A marvelously expert and absorbing aerial performance that make a new record in sensational mid-air projection."<sup>34</sup>

Edith Waller. Deloras Boyd collection.

The La Mars were listed with the roster of Masterson's Railroad Shows in the *Billboard* of May 20, 1911, but a *Pantagraph* article dated May 14, 1911 stated that the "troupe La Mars, leaves this morning for New York City, to join the Barnum and Bailey Circus for the coming season. . . . The La Mars are composed of the following people: Edward Foreman, Manager, and wife; Charles Fisher (Waller) and wife; Arthur Thompson, Harry Hatfield and Charles Thrall. This will be the fourth season with this show."

By September another Bloomington boy, Jack Ernest, had been added to the La Mar troupe. It was stated that Ed with his wife and Jack Ernest would be playing vaudeville dates through the winter. The personnel were listed early in 1912 as: Mr. and Mrs. Edward Foreman, George Gish (of New York), Charles Waller, Arthur Thompson and Jack Ernest.<sup>35</sup>

After leaving the La Mar act in 1913, Jack Ernest worked with various partners. He married Ora Loretta of the famous Loretta Twins bar act. Together with George Novikoff, Jack and the Loretas formed the Ernestonians' aerial act. Jack died in Puerto Rico in 1921 after taking a fall to the net. Later, Jack and Ora's daughter June Ernest married the screen actor Burt Lancaster.

The troupe identified as "the Flying La Mars" that was working with Masterson's Railroad shows that year had no relationship to Foreman's act. In 1912 Ed Foreman's La Mar troupe was made up of Edward and his wife, George Gish, of New York City; Charles Waller, Jack Ernest and Arthur Thompson, all of Bloomington. On January 13, 1913 the *Daily Pantagraph* reported: "The New Empress Theatre, on West Washington Street, had an auspicious opening Saturday and the house was filled at every performance. Manager Ed Foreman, of the Flying Fisher fame, has constructed a pretty place adequately equipped with all the latest devices for success of the Nickle show and will introduce some interesting novelties. . . ."

At that time Foreman retired from trapeze performance to devote his time to theater management.<sup>36</sup>



### The Da Comas

It is important to note another outstanding troupe that was with the Ringling show during the 1890s and early 1900s, the Da Comas. As early as 1880 the *New York Clipper* listed an act called the "Decomas" with W. W. Cole's New York and New Orleans Circus. In 1883 the "De Coma Bros." published ads illustrating a bicycle wire act, advertising for work. Their address was then listed as 290 South Howard Street, Akron, Ohio. In November of that year they advertised again, stating that they were "THE WORLD'S GREATEST AND ORIGINAL BICYCLE-RIDERS." They had been working parks and fairs. The Da Comas were with the Frank A. Robbins' Circus, Museum and Menagerie in 1885 and it was reported that two of the Da Coma brothers were injured in a fall during their bicycle act in Rockland, Maine, that year. In 1888 they were with Daniel Shelby's Golden Circus. The "Da Coma children" were with R. F. Clemens' New Railroad Show in 1890. The Da Coma troupe was with the Orrin Brothers' show until spring of 1891, and then joined the John Robinson show for the tenting season. In 1893 they were listed with both the Great Wallace Show, and the Orrin Bros. Circus in Mexico City.<sup>37</sup>

The Da Coma act, consisting of Arthur, Rose and Bessie, is found working with the Ringling show as early as 1894. By this time the Da Comas were performing a leap for life. The acts performed by

both the Flying Fishers and the Da Comas were described in the route book that year: "... the heavier man of each quartette, hanging head downward, catches the member of his troupe who swings entirely across the amphitheatre, from another trapeze." The Da Comas continued with the Ringling show, on-and-off, for the next thirty or so years. At any rate, in 1912, the Da Comas were joined by Ed Foreman's nephew, Harry. Harry La Mar (Foreman) toured Australia with the Da Comas that year, and he was listed with the Da Coma act on the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus late in the season.<sup>38</sup>

### Harry Foreman's Flying La Mars

Harry Foreman was born April 18, 1893 in Bloomington. As stated above, Harry began his career in either 1908 or 1909 working with his uncle Ed. His first trip to Australia was in 1912 with the Da Coma troupe. He served with an entertainment unit in the service during World War I. Following his stint in the military, Harry returned to Australia in 1920 with Tom Nelson's Flying Nelsons. He performed on the Ringling Brothers' Circus with the Flying Nelsons for five years; in 1922 with the Nelsons on the Sells Floto Circus. At some time he also worked with the original Flying Valentino troupe.<sup>39</sup>

Harry formed his own troupe and returned to Australia again from 1927 to 1931 performing for the Wirth Circus in his own act, the Flying La Mars. While in Melbourne in 1928, Harry's fiancé, Velma Harvey, died as a result of an accident. The flying rigging



was strung in a building that was too short to accommodate the complete net, and no apron was used behind the pedestal board. When she missed the flybar on her return to the pedestal board she literally hit a brick wall. Returning to the United States in 1931, his troupe consisted of: Harry Foreman (603 E Mill Street), Betty Phillips (815 Hovey Ave.), Alice Hendryx (506 W. Jefferson St.), Ray Hendryx (503 W. Grove St.), and Henry Robbins (1414 N. Rosney St.). This was the last year that the Flying La Mars worked with a circus. Thereafter they worked with manager Al Martin booking, independent dates at parks and fairs, and indoor shrine circus dates. The personnel of the La Mar troupe in 1935 was: Harry La Mar, Francis Reiner (as catcher, later replaced by Hank Robbins when Reiner was injured in a rigging accident), Betty Phillips and Walt Graybeal.<sup>40</sup>

Graybeal related that he had worked with Harry La Van's troupe in 1932 and 1933. He had become friends with Harry Foreman while practicing at the YMCA in Bloomington. Harry, Walt said, was "pretty famous—well anyhow, he'd been to Australia. He was pretty well known." He hired on as a flyer with the La Mar troupe. Harry agreed to pay him \$35 for the "still dates" where the rigging did not have to be taken down and put up and \$50 for the park performances. Walt was allowed one dollar a day for meals, which was marked down "as a debit in his book." Harry decided to go to New York and work in vaudeville that year, but he had not booked any dates. The La Mar troupe only worked about four weeks that season. "At the end of the time he had only debits marked down for me," Walt said. "I figured he owed me \$35." Harry paid him the \$35, but Harry was also a compulsive gambler; he then lost money playing the slot machines in the cook house. Within about an hour of being paid off someone approached Walt with a message from Harry. He wanted to borrow ten dollars.

Harry probably broke in more flyers and catchers with his act than any other trapeze artist, simply because people would not stay with him for more than a season or two. Besides his financial issues, he was temperamental. The *Springfield* (Massachusetts) *Sunday Union and Republican* of August 1, 1943 stated: "If, as seldom happens, his catcher errs and Harry falls to the net, he is a man beside himself. His harangue to the catcher, after the act, makes between-halves exhortations of a football coach seem pale and dull. 'Don't you see you dropped your head back,' La Mar will storm, and his blue-green eyes will flash, 'you understand what I mean. You dropped your head. This way,' he will demonstrate; and the explosion may continue for an hour. The trick generally goes right the next time."

Harry was a poor businessman. Walter Graybeal made very little money while working with Harry La Mar, and he left the troupe at the end of the season. The rigging accident that disabled Francis Reiner that year was caused by the crane bars being tangled in the power lines overhead as the rigging was being taken down. Reiner was badly burned in the mishap. The La Mar troupe was with the Walter L. Main show in 1935.<sup>41</sup>

For practice through the winter Harry used the YMCA facilities. When it was practical to practice outdoors he used his own back yard on Mill Street, or Circus Park, which was owned by Burt Doss of the Flying Thrillers. In 1943 Harry's troupe included Mary Stevens, and in 1945 when Lowell Sherer became the catcher for the act, Mary and Lowell were married. Jimmy Crocker was the catcher, then only sixteen years old. Crocker later worked with Art Concello's troupes on the Ringling-Barnum show.<sup>42</sup>

Harry broke in a flyer named Jack Murphy in 1947. Jack was a Bloomington boy who was raised by his mother. His father was a professional gambler, and Jack himself made a living hustling

pool all through the winter season. Jack had done a comedy bar act with Dick Tally the year before. Harry broke him in as a flyer with his act. Jack stayed with the La Mars for two seasons and then went with the Artonys, one of Art Concello's troupes with the Ringling-Barnum Circus. Harry's other flyer that year was Howard Waters who quit at the end of the season.<sup>43</sup>

In 1948 a young flyer named J. R. Fenton joined the act. J. R. was a distinctive flyer for turning a twist with every trick. That year the La Mars (called the "Four Flying La Marrs") are found performing at the Minneapolis Shrine Circus in February, and with the Garden Bros. Circus in Toronto as an added attraction in April. Their catcher was Jack Bray, from California. Bob Moeckel was the other flyer with the act. Moeckel also did comedy, but later became a catcher as well.<sup>44</sup>

In 1949 they played parks and fairs in New York and Massachusetts for the Al Martin booking agency. An item from the March 25, 1950 *Billboard* stated that the La Mars were returning to Bloomington after closing their tour in Kansas City. In April they were playing with the Frank Wirth Circus in Syracuse, at the St. Louis Police Circus in May, and the Harlacker Charity show in Detroit in June. Harry was well known in the profession as an outstanding flyer, booking his own act independently with parks and fairs, and with indoor dates.<sup>45</sup>

In 1951 the La Mar troupe consisted of J. R. Fenton, Bob Moeckel (catcher), Roger Bastarche (comedian), and Harry Foreman. He was one of the faithful flyers who trained and performed at the YMCA facilities in Bloomington, and he used his own lot on East Mill Street for practice when weather permitted. Harry married rather late in life, on April 18, 1954 to Marie Kuhlman. Through the 1950s and into the 1960s Harry continued to train new performers. Among them were John R. Fenton, Sid Smith, Lowell and Mary Shearer (who later formed the Flying Corderos act), Howard Waters, James Olsen, Mike and June Malko, and Tony Steele. Harry retired at age 64, and moved to St. Petersburg, Florida in the late 1960s. His neighbor on Mill Street and longtime friend Gilbert Hoover related that Harry had emphysema from years of smoking. Harry was "very much a gentleman." The proudest moment in his career, Harry stated, was not with the accomplishment of any trick of his own. It came when he worked the same show with the famous Clarkonians; Charles and Ernie Clarke, who were the first flying return team to catch a consistent triple somersault. Harry died in 1972 at age 78 in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.<sup>46</sup>

#### Charles Waller's Flying Fishers

Resuming the discussion of the Fisher La Mar troupe, the Fishers and the La Mars split up in 1913. Charles Waller was then 25 years old. He and his wife Edith had been married for five years. Waller joined John Guiran, a French horizontal bar performer, to form the Guiram-Fisher flying return act. Arthur Thompson was catching for the troupe; Guiran and Waller were the leapers. According to the *Daily Bulletin*, April 11, 1913, "Mrs. Charles Fisher and Miss Era Fisher will negotiate the trapeze end of the act." This implies that the ladies were simply dropping the flybar for the men to return to the pedestal board during the performance. After six months practice, they were performing: "the single, one and a half, double, two and a half, and twisting somersaults." The *Bulletin* reported that the troupe was performing three "different kinds of double twists, and will include a number of new features in aerial work which have never been introduced before." They were to leave for Peru, Indiana on April 20 to join the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus. This was just a few weeks after the devastating



flood on the Wabash River that cost the lives of a number of exotic animals on the show. The Guiran-Fisher troupe appeared in Display 6 of the program doing a horizontal bar routine, and in Display 18 doing their flying return act.<sup>47</sup>

In 1914 Charles Waller split up with John Guiram and presented his Flying Fishers act with the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus once again. Charles and Edith were living at 404 S. State Street in Bloomington in 1915. The troupe now consisted of: Charles and Edith Waller, Miss Musselman (Edith's sister, Esther), Thomas Beckman and William Beckman. The Beckman brothers were from Waller's hometown of Quincy, Illinois. Thomas Beckman's obituary, published in *Billboard* on March 18, 1939, stated that he had joined out with the Flying Beckmans, also of Quincy, at the age of fifteen (about 1907) as a catcher for the act. The Beckman troupe may have been doing either a flying return, or a casting act at that time. Thomas spent five years with the Baldwins before he and his brother, William "joined the Mulhill Circus." Since it was not stated that the brothers were working with a specific troupe at that time it is possible that they were doing a horizontal bar act together. They joined the Flying Fishers in 1914, and remained with the Fishers for four years. With the Ringling show in 1917 the Beckmans (a man and woman) were also performing a double trapeze act, advertised as a "European Import." The *Billboard* of June 2, 1917 reported that Tom was catching for the Charles Siegrist troupe. Following this Tom, William, and William's wife Le Dore worked with the Siegrist troupe on the Barnum and Bailey Circus. This must have been for only part of one season because the article went on to state that Tom served in the military during World War I. After this he worked in vaudeville for seven years. Thomas' obituary did not specifically mention the 1921 season, but the flying act listed with the Sells Floto Circus that year was the "Beckman Todd troupe." The troupe, combined with the Arthur Nelson flying act, included, in part, Alec Todd, late of the Flying Wards, Harry La Mar, Ray Nelson, Juanita Nelson, Bee Star, Bob Musselman, and the Beckman brothers. Thomas, according to his obituary in *Billboard*, retired from aerial work in 1937, and, along with his brother, Ed, "organized the Beckman Troupe of 11 girls, which played county fairs the past two seasons." Thomas died March 3, 1939 of a heart attack in Quincy. The Beckman Brothers were pictured with the Fishers in the Gollmar Brothers' courier in 1916.<sup>48</sup>

Apparently Thomas Beckman spent only three years with the Fisher troupe. The personnel of the Fishers' troupe, listed in the *Daily Bulletin* of March 19, 1917 consisted of Charles and Edith Waller, Herbert Fleming, Esther Musselman and Eddie Beckman.

The Fishers spent the winter practicing at the YMCA, and were booked to work parks and fairs that year. The article also stated that Robert Fisher (Edith's brother Bob Musselman) would be working on the Gollmar Brothers' Circus in a troupe including Mr. and Mrs. Harry Hatfield and Frank Ardell. The article did not specify the name of the act.

In 1915 Charles Waller's Flying Fishers worked with the Gollmar Bros. Circus. Charles and Edith's daughter Constance worked with the act for many years, but confided years later that she had no desire to work with the circus. She had wanted to be a dancer. In August of 1915 Waller wrote to Charles Ringling requesting a place with the show. He offered "my big aerial act and duble (sic) trapeze (sic) act" for \$200 per week. By 1924 the Wallers had moved to 1514 Wright Street in Bloomington. In 1926 they were listed at 1505 Wright Street.<sup>49</sup>

The Fisher troupe enlisted an eighteen year old Illinois State Normal University student who had fallen for their daughter in



The Flying Fishers, c.1915. Left to right Herb Fleming, Bob Musselman, Edith Waller, Charles Waller, unidentified girl flyer (possibly Easter Musselman). Author's collection.

1932 as their catcher. His name was Glenn Higginbotham, and he and Connie were married some time later. The 1934 Bloomington directory listed the Wallers' residence again as 1505 Wright Street, but in 1935 they moved to a home at 5 Berenz Place, where they lived for several years. Waller's occupation was variously listed as "entertainer" or "showman." About 1930, according to Walt Graybeal, Charles broke in two Bloomington boys, Ulrick Burkhalter and Walter Werdebaugh, with the Flying Fishers. After a short stint with the Fishers both men quit and hired out driving

The Flying Fishers at the March 29, 1937 YMCA Circus. Left to right Charles Waller, Connie Waller Higginbotham, Glen Higginbotham, Edith Waller and Walter Higginbotham. Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections.





trucks for the Coca Cola company. Burkhalter later owned a bottling company in Bloomington. He booked his Flying Fishers act independently with Shrine circuses, and parks and fairs from the 1920s through the 1940s. They worked the Chicago World's Fair in 1933. The Wallers moved to St. Petersburg, Florida in 1939, and then to Tarpon Springs.<sup>50</sup>

An article from *The Independent* of St. Petersburg, Florida dated March 4, 1948 stated that Charles was still working at age 59. The troupe still consisted of Charles and Edith; daughter Connie, and her husband Glenn. Edith and Glenn were both catching for the act, and Charles and Connie were doing the flying. The Wallers and the Higginbothams lived side by side in St. Petersburg at that time, and the flying return rigging was set up between their two houses. The troupe had suffered two serious accidents over the years; Connie had missed the bar at one time and bounced off of the ridge rope, hitting the ground and breaking her leg in two places. Charles had once missed the bar while doing a passing trick and tumbled into the apron, dislocating his shoulder. Charles Walled died April 2, 1977 in Tarpon Springs, Florida at age 88. His wife Edith, died ten days later.<sup>51</sup>

### Bob Fisher's Fearless Flyers

The activities of Robert Musselman and his troupe, Bob Fisher's Five Fearless Flyers, deserve separate space at this point; partly because, of all of Charles Waller's students, Musselman alone retained the Fisher name; and partly because of his extensive influence on the profession. Musselman must have broken in with Charles Waller's act in about 1915, at fifteen years of age. Early photographs (undated, author's collection) picture a very young-looking Bob Musselman and Herb Fleming with the Flying Fishers troupe. Between 1918 and 1920 he was working with the Charles Siegrist troupe on the Barnum and Bailey Circus, although his listing in Bloomington's 1919 city directory was recorded as "emp LE&W" (Lake Erie and Western Railroad), residing at 806 South Main Street. In 1921 he was with the Nelson flying act on the Sells Floto show. By 1923 he and his wife Francis were working with the Flying Wards, again on the Sells Floto show. Musselmans address, as recorded in the Bloomington city directory that year, was 707 W. Olive Street, where they would reside for a number of years. His occupation was recorded over the years as "aerialist," "acrobat," and "performer." The year 1923 was the only one that Musselman is found working with the Wards, but apparently Eddie Ward managed his act for some time.<sup>52</sup>

A letter to his friend, Arnold Riegger, dated February 13, 1926, requests Riegger to "consider a position for me." Apparently Riegger, a retired flyer with the La Van flying act, was booking acts at that time. Musselman complained that "the boy I have is causeing (sic) me a lot of trouble and I must let him go." The "boy" in question was not identified, nor was the nature of his "trouble," but it may have been Ray Hendryx. Ray was the handsome and talented nephew of Leo Hendryx, an all-round veteran performer of Bloomington. Ray was said to have a drinking problem, and he died in March of 1939, falling from a Chicago and Alton passenger train south of Joliet.

In 1927 the Musselmans teamed up with Paul and Nellie Sullivan (two more of the Wards' protégés) to work with the Sells Floto show again. The *Sheboygan Press* reported later (July 1, 1935) that Musselman had performed a minor miracle at that time. While performing in Rock Springs Park, West Virginia, a woman who had lost her voice for several years from a vocal infection watched Bob perform a blindfold somersault to his catcher. When he missed his catch the lady "gave a loud shriek, and was there-

after able to speak again."

A February 11, 1927 letter in the Pfening Archives from Eddie Ward to Zack Terrell, Sells Floto manager read: "... they (Musselman and Sullivan) want me to put the act together and practice in my Bldg and it will cost me lots to get the act ready. ... Bobby wants Eight Hundred for the Bldg (the coliseum engagement) And Paul Sullivan wants four Hundred for the Bldg. You know the (that) getting the Riggin Ready for the Bldg it cost a lot and a lot of hard work. The price I give you for the Hold think (whole thing) 1800.00 is the best I can do By the time I get it so it looks like a act."<sup>53</sup>

Though Fisher stated that he would be working for Eddie, "he to furnish the riggin, I will furnish the people," he wanted it "understood that the title and Billing of the act is to be the Fearless Flyer Sullivan Troupe and not the Wards or any name pertaining (sic) to it." The Fisher-Sullivan troupe worked with the Sells Floto show again in 1928.

In 1929 Musselman began calling his act "Bob Fisher's Fearless Flyers" for the first time. They performed for the opening of the 101 Ranch Wild West Show at the Coliseum in Chicago in April. The act boasted "four different double somersaults," one of them blindfolded in a sack. They wrote Zack Terrell of the Sells Floto show for work in September. The act, as listed in the *Daily Pantagraph* of October 3, 1929, consisted of Bob and Francis Musselman, Delores Musselman (Bob's sister), Lucile Williams, Ray Hendricks, Ulrich Burkholter, Dick French, Jean Arthur, Buddy Rogers and Paul Lucas. Not all of these people were with the Fearless Flyers, however. Musselman's troupe was doing stunts for the movie *Half Way to Heaven*, and some of the people were among the cast of the film along Buddy Rogers and Jean Arthur. Musselman's troupe consisted of five people; three men and two women.<sup>54</sup>

In 1931 they were playing parks and fairs; the troupe consisting of Mr. and Mrs. Bob Musselman, Harold Genders, Gracie Moore and Everett White. In September the Fearless Flyers began a tour of Spain, Portugal, France Belgium and Germany. They continued their tour of Europe in October and November, appearing at Circo Price in Madrid; Circo Royal in Brussels; and Cirque Municipal in Rouen, France. They passed into 1932 playing Cirque Medrand, Paris; Cirque Olympia, Barcelona; and played dates in Hanover, Hamburg and Berlin. The Fearless Flyers continued to tour through the winter months in South America, taking 28 days in transit from Hamburg to Buenos Aires. Returning to the United States in the spring, they combined with Mayme Ward's troupe to make a nine person flying act playing Shrine dates at Denver, Los Angeles, Des Moines and elsewhere. Harold Genders and Gracie Moore were married on the pedestal board of the flying act rigging at Ligonier Park that spring before a crowd of 6,000 people. Harold (Tuffy) and Gracie had been "going together" since working together with the Flying Wards troupe in 1929, but he had promised his mother that he would not get married until he turned 21.<sup>55</sup>

Harold and Gracie dropped out of the act at that time, and when the Fearless Flyers departed for another European tour in April the troupe consisted of Bob and Francis Musselman, Eddie Ward Jr. and Clayton Behee. The April 29 *Billboard* reported that they planned to play Tivoli Park in Stockholm for a month beginning in May; traveling to Gothenburg for fifteen days; Copenhagen from July 1 to the middle of August; and returned to New York on August 18. By October they were in Honolulu.<sup>56</sup>

The Fearless Flyers are next heard from in January of 1934, working the Shrine Show in Grand Rapids, Michigan. It was stated



that they would begin an extended European tour in November, but the trip was eventually cancelled, probably because of economic conditions and the growing political unrest on the Continent. The Fearless Flyers played Shrine dates in Hartford and Albany in March. They continued with the St Louis Police Circus in April, with an act consisting of three men and two women; Lorraine Mather substituting for Francis while she was off due to an injury. Through the tenting season they were the feature flying act with the Russell Bros. Circus, beginning a business relationship with that show that lasted several years. During some of his tenure with the Russell show Bob played base drum with the Russell Brothers band. They returned to playing Shrine dates in November; playing in Birmingham and through the South.<sup>57</sup>

In January of 1935 Musselman's entire truck and equipment was destroyed by fire, but they were back performing with the Shrine show in Lewiston, Maine in March. The Fearless Flyers were featured again that year on the Russell Bros. Circus, with Bob doing a blindfold double somersault. He was temporarily out of the act in September with an infected hand, and Danny Silva substituted for him. An advertisement for the Five Fearless Flyers from about this time pictured Bob, Francis, daughter Maxine, Ray Hendrix, and another unidentified flyer (Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections). A *Sheboygan Press* article from July 6 stated that Frances "has the distinction of being the only woman as in the role of 'catcher' in a big aerial act such as Bob Fisher's Five Fearless Flyers will present in Sheboygan Monday, July 8, with the Russell Bros. Circus."<sup>58</sup>

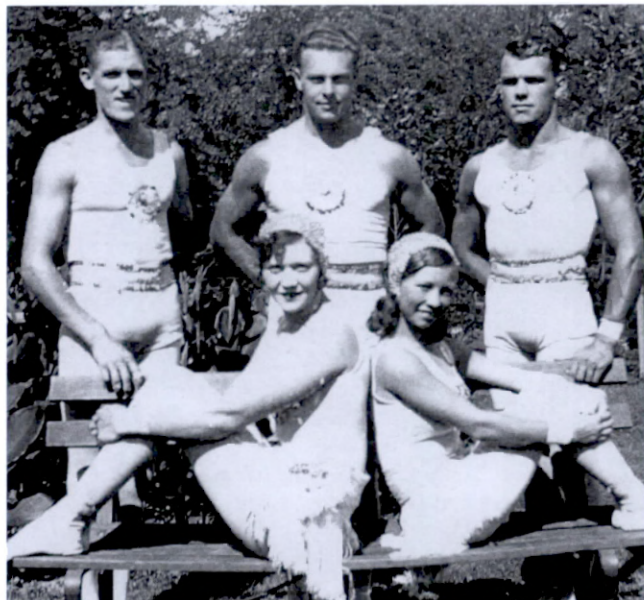
Bob Fisher's Fearless Flyers was again playing Shrine dates during the winter of 1935-1936 and again with the Russell Brothers Circus in the tenting season of 1936. *Billboard* reported on May 2 that "This troupe of aerialists turns in a high class, finished performance. The routine is characterized throughout by much charm and personality, with fine wardrobe. Bob Fisher's blindfold somersault and Eldon Day's triple into the net give a thrilling finish." At the close of the season they played the winter circus in Jamaica, and the New York and the San Francisco Shrine shows in February of 1937. They again toured with the Russell Brothers' Circus during the tenting season. The *Billboard* reported that they bought a new house trailer in June. The Russell show closed in November, and the Fearless Flyers played Shrine dates after that as usual.<sup>59</sup>

They were with the Al G. Barnes-Sells Floto show in 1938, the act going under the name of "The De Vards," with Bob and Francis; their daughter Maxine; Eldon Day and Joe Remelette. Thereafter they played indoor dates as the Fearless Flyers once again for Orrin Davenport.<sup>60</sup>

The Fearless Flyers were planning another tour of Europe in 1939 with a nine person flying act after playing with the Texas Longhorn Shows in December. The year 1940 began with the Fearless Flyers playing parks and fairs, as usual: Idlewild Park, Ligonier, Pennsylvania in June; Happyland Shows at Port Huron, Michigan in July; and other fair dates for the J. C. Michaels booking agency in July.<sup>61</sup>

In the *Billboard Supplement* of November 30, 1940 they advertised that they had performed in Copenhagen, Stockholm, Gothenburg, Buenos Aires, Honolulu, Havana, Mexico City, Madrid, Barcelona, and Paris. They stated they could furnish three ten-person flying acts, and fill in with other performances. Bob and Francis moved to a new address this year: 845 Forty-third Ave. North, St. Petersburg, Florida.

On December 28, 1940 the *Billboard* advertised that Bob's wife Maxine died of a kidney ailment on December 17 at St. Anthony



Bob Fisher's 1932 act. Bob Musselman, Everett White, Harold "Tuffy" Genders, Francis Mulselman and Gracie Moore (soon to be Genders). Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections. (Fred Dahlinger).

Hospital in St. Petersburg. He married Evelyn Virginia Nelson, also from Bloomington, in 1950. After Maxine's death the Fearless Flyers worked parks and fairs for a few years, and Musselman retired from the flying act about 1950. He worked for some time as manager of Ligonier Park, and Mickey King stated that he had given her a job working the duck pond games when she retired from solo aerial work.

#### Minnie Fisher

Charles Noble's wife, Minnie Fisher (nee Minnie Averit), continued to perform as a solo attraction iron jaw performer after his death in 1906. In 1916 she was working with John Robinson's Ten Big Shows, and she remained with that show for at least four more seasons. She published a letter in the February 9, 1918 *Billboard* while traveling with the Santos & Artigas Circus in Cuba: "The Loretts and I are the No. 1 show," she wrote. She worked with the Santos & Artigas Circus for three months, before returning to her home in Beaumont, Texas. She was once again with the John Robinson Circus in 1917. The July 28 *Billboard* stated that Minnie had been a trained nurse, and was initiating a Red Cross movement with the show. Minnie was still popular enough to have her photograph appear in the December 7, 1918 *Billboard* with the following caption: "Minnie Fisher, The original world's greatest iron jaw woman. Sensational slide for life. Featured past three seasons John Robinson Shows. In Chicago arranging vaudeville bookings." In the winter of 1918-1919 she toured the vaudeville circuit. She was listed on the roster of the Sells Floto Circus in 1921, as were Charles Waller's Flying Fishers. Minnie continued working with various circuses and on the stage for a number of years, and in the 1930s she was a member of the Pacific Coast Showman's League. Though Clyde Noble later claimed that Minnie had been the first woman to perform the iron jaw act in the United States, a number of people, both men and women, have been found doing performances that were called "iron jaw" before Minnie entered the profession. As early as 1882 a woman performer called Minetta was called the "iron-jaw woman," and in 1884



someone called Madame Sebastian was being called the "iron-jaw lady." To give Clyde's account the benefit of the doubt, however, it is significant to note that it has not been determined whether these people were spinning from the iron jaw swivel, as Minnie Fisher did; or whether they were holding other objects by the iron jaw apparatus in feats of strength.<sup>62</sup>

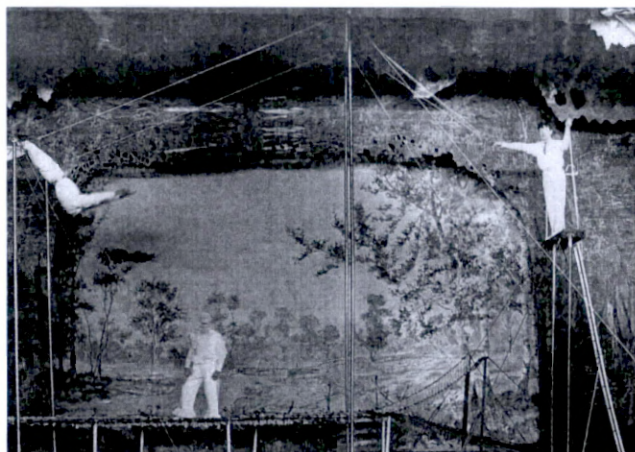
### Clyde Noble's Flying Fishers

Clyde Noble worked only a year after his brother's death before retiring from the aerial business to manage and tour with his wife Emily Vecchi's bicycle act on stage. He formed a new Flying Fishers act composed of three people for work in parks and fairs for the Barnes and Caruthers booking agency. His first year out Clyde's act consisted of himself, Fred Johnson and Frank DuBois. His scrapbook provides interesting information about his Flying Fisher troupe, although Clyde did not always provided dates or publication information for the clippings. An article from the *Rochester* (Minnesota) *Union and Advertiser* described the Flying Fishers act as a "combination casting and trampoline return." One article from the *Rochester* (Minnesota) *Democrat and Chronicle* must date to 1909, since it was stated that Clyde and Emily had been married for six months. An article from the *Rochester Herald* described the performance: "Differing from the usual run of similar acts, a bounding bed takes the place of the net usually stretched beneath the performers. After somersaulting, the gymnasts fall to the net, from which they are rebounded high into the air and are again grasped by the 'catcher' after completing an additional number of revolutions. A feature of the act yesterday afternoon was the trial of the 'ball' of the trio to turn two somersaults from the swinging bar to the hands of Fisher and then after striking the bounding net, to complete two more whirls into the hands of the 'catcher.' Again and again the man attempted the feat only to miss on account of the heavy lake wind. When success was finally attained the gymnast was liberally rewarded by applause..."<sup>63</sup>

Another article stated that the Flying Fishers would be touring Washington and Rogers ball parks in Chicago; Davenport, Iowa; Joliet, Illinois; Kalamazoo, Michigan; Minneapolis; London, Ontario; Flint, Michigan; Jefferson, Wisconsin; Sedalia, Missouri; Hot Springs, Pine Bluff, and Little Rock, Arkansas; and Shreveport, Louisiana. The troupe consisted of Clyde, Fred Johnson and Frank Harrold. At some point Harrold was replaced by Raymond Hunter of Streator, Illinois. Hunter was only sixteen years old, but had already developed an act on the Roman rings and stationary bar that played fairs and celebrations. Ray Hunter went on to form his own act with various partners over the years, which he called the "Aerial Le Rays."

In 1932, with Andy Bakalar as his partner, Hunter formed a comedy cannon act spoofing the act performed by the Great Wilno. They first performed this act at the YMCA Circus in Bloomington that year, and later took it on the Russell Brothers and the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circuses.<sup>64</sup>

In 1910 Clyde arranged for Emily's two sisters, Margherita and Roma, to come to the United States to form a new bicycle act. Clyde's name was listed along with Frank Harrold as one of the circus committee when the first YMCA Circus was presented in Bloomington that year. In time the YMCA would incorporate a permanent trapeze rigging into the ceiling of the gymnasium; the circus people were allowed to practice their art in the YMCA through the winter months; and the "Y" Circus would become an annual event, with the professionals performing side-by-side with the citizens of the city. In 1910 the first "Y" Circus did not present



Clyde Noble's Flying Fishers stage rigging. Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections.

a flying return act, however. Clyde and Frank participated in the leaping line. It was not until 1912 that the YMCA Circus allowed the Fisher act to construct their rigging on the floor of the "Y" gymnasium. The establishment of the YMCA Circus was a turning point in Bloomington circus history, with cooperation between the city and the professional circus people that was unique to the community.<sup>65</sup>

A partial listing of Clyde's Flying Fishers 1910 vaudeville route reconstructed from his scrapbook follows: Lexington, Kentucky, June 11; Atlanta, July 18; Nashville, August 7; Chattanooga, August 1; Louisville, August 7; Dallas, August 25-31; the following Michigan dates, Bay City, September 26; Ann Arbor, October 3-5; Jackson, October 7-9; Saginaw, October 9; Kalamazoo, October 24; Battle Creek, October 31; Flint, November 7-10; Rockford, Illinois, November 14; Jamestown and Rochester, New York.

Clyde quit the flying act for a time to tour with Emily's bicycle troupe, which they called the "La Petite Emily Troupe." The La Petite Emily troupe practiced at the Uhland Hall on South Main Street in Bloomington before taking the act on the road. An undated letterhead at Circus World Museum listed Emily Noble's U. S. address as 604 E. Taylor Street in Bloomington, Illinois, the Nobles' homestead; and in England as 141 Wardour St., Oxford St., London.

Emily's sisters returned to England after the 1911 season, and the La Petite Emily act broke up. Clyde again revived his three person flying act in 1912 with a smaller rigging for stage performance, Clyde using a cradle for the catching. The Flying Fishers vaudeville partial route for 1912 included Ft. Wayne, Indiana; Detroit; Rochester; Sioux Falls, South Dakota; Louisville; Indianapolis; Chicago; Leavenworth, Kansas; Davenport, Iowa; San Diego; Portland; San Francisco; Seattle; Medford, Oregon; Vancouver; Calgary; Seattle; San Francisco; Tacoma, Washington; Portland; Spokane; Oakland; Eugene, Oregon; San Francisco; Chicago; Moline, Illinois; Gary, Indiana; Springfield, Illinois; Peoria, Illinois; and Terra Haute, Indiana. A series of engagements in England followed before returning to North America to play St. Paul; Detroit; Sioux City, Iowa; Kansas City; Minneapolis; Topeka, Kansas; St. Joseph, Missouri; Wichita, Kansas; Kalamazoo; Spokane; Vancouver; Seattle; Victoria, British Columbia; Tacoma; and Portland.<sup>66</sup>

Clyde was instrumental in establishing the relationship between the circus community and the YMCA which led to winter practices



at that facility and the annual circus presentation. His Flying Fishers act was performing with the YMCA Circus in 1912. This new act had been performing for nine months when it was featured in an article in the *Bloomington Daily Bulletin* of July 24, 1913. Clyde's act consisted of himself, Fred Johnson and Frank Cunliffe. At other times the comedy was said to have been performed by Frank Du Bois, but in one article from the *Ottawa Journal* (Clyde's scrapbook) this third member was identified as Frank Smuggles. This calls into question the identity of third member of the troupe, whose first name was almost always Frank, but whose last name changed frequently. It is worth mentioning that Clyde also had one brother whose name was Frank. Clyde was doing the catching with the act; Fred and Frank were the flyers. The net, too, was small; having little or no apron, and affording almost no protection from flying beyond the net if they were to miss a trick. The net was again stretched so tightly that it doubled as a trampoline. The Fishers' act was described in an article from Clyde's scrapbook: "The interior of a circus is shown on canvas, which covers the rear and sides of the stage and makes an appropriate background for what is really a thrilling circus act. Leaving a swinging



Clyde Noble with the "La Petite Emily" act. Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections.

trapeze and turning single or double somersaults and finally caught by another member of the troupe suspended by the legs from a horizontal bar is one of the many startling feats which they perform. The comedian does some really clever work, and at the same time succeeds in keeping the house in thorough good humour."

The *Terre Haute Post* reported in September of 1913 "Just why the clown acrobat with the Three Flying Fishers don't break every bone in his body and even his neck is a wonder. [H]e falls from one trapeze to another and winds up turning 30 consecutive somersaults [on the trampoline]." The article stated that the new flying act would work several large cities in the East before leaving November first for a tour of Europe. They expected to open in Manchester, and tour England and the mainland for twenty-six weeks, before returning to the states to begin a tour on the Pantages vaudeville circuit. Clyde's scrapbook is full of rave reviews, calling the Fisher act the most sensational aerial turn in vaudeville, and stating that they were often called back for curtain calls by

enthusiastic audiences. The tour was cut short when war broke out in 1914, and the Flying Fishers returned to America. After their return Clyde's scrapbook records that they toured as far west as California and Washington. They made one more trip to Europe, according to Clyde's article, before retiring from trapeze for good in 1919.<sup>67</sup>

After he retired from trapeze work, he and Emily settled into a beautiful little Tudor home at 507 South Moore Street. Clyde became partners with William Homuth in a jewelry shop in downtown Bloomington. In 1922 he bought the jewelry department in the "Newmarket," and operated the business for seventeen years. He then opened his own jewelry store on North Center Street, which he operated for five more years before retiring altogether. Though he never again traveled with the circus, he was active in the Community Players, as well as the Red Cross, the Rotary, and a number of other organizations in the years up to his death on May 3, 1955 at age 72.<sup>68</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Shettel, James W., "The First Bareback Somersault Rider," *The Circus Scrapbook*, October 1931, p. 37.
2. *Daily Pantagraph*, Bloomington, Illinois June 30, 1910; *Daily Pantagraph*, September 22, 1871.
3. *New York Clipper*, April supplement, 1875; *Billboard*, July 15, 1933.
4. *New York Clipper*, January 22, 1887, p. 708.
5. *Ibid.*, April 29, 1876, p. 39; *Ibid.*, June 29, 1878; *Ibid.*, July 20, 1878.
6. King, Orin C., "Only Big Show Coming," *Bandwagon*, January-February, 1988; *New York Clipper*, March 29, 1879.
7. *Ibid.*, March 19, 1881; Cooke, Louis E., "Walter L. Main," *Bandwagon*, May-June 1967; *New York Clipper*, February 4, February 11, February 25, March 20, 1882.
8. *Ibid.*, June 24, 1882; August 12, 1882; August 19, 1882; October 28, 1882; May 3, 1884.
9. *Ibid.*, January 31, 1884; May 3; November 29; March 21, 1885; April 18; September 19, 1885; *Quincy Daily Herald*, October 16, 1885, p. 4, courtesy of Delores Boyd.
10. *New York Clipper*, August 22, 1891; see "Notes from Smith & Fralando's British Circus" roster; *Ibid.*, April 18, 1885; May 8; *Billboard*, June 10, 1933; *Quincy Herald Whig*, June 18, 1972; *Billboard*, June 10, 1933.
11. *New York Clipper*, April 30, 1887; February 26, 1887; March 31, 1888, p. 49; November 10, 1888 p. 565.
12. *Ibid.*, April 11, 1891; Information provided by Delores Boyd.
13. Clyde Noble scrapbook, Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collection; *New York Clipper*, July 18, 1891.
14. *Daily Pantagraph* January 21, 1908; February 23, 1918.
15. *Ibid.*, January 21, 1908; July 22, 1928; Noble, Clyde, "The Man on the Flying Trapeze," *White Tops*, September-October 1950, p. 5; *New York Clipper* February 21, 1891; September 26, 1891; April 9, 1892;
16. Photo courtesy of Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections c. 1895; photo from Clyde Noble's scrapbook, Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections.
17. *New York Clipper* November 5, 1881; February 25, 1882; November 18, 1882; March 29, 1890; May 20, 1893; May 29, 1897; March 28, 1885; January 23, 1886.
18. *Ibid.*, April 14, 1888.
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20. *Ibid.*, January 21, 1893; Forepaugh courier, Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections; *New York Clipper* March 10, 1894; Albert M. Wetter herald, Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections; *New York Clipper* December 2, 1893; April 21, 1894; March 28, 1896; *The Great Wallace Show Route Book, Season of 1895*; *Billboard*, July 28, 1917.
21. *Daily Pantagraph* June 30, 1910; Griffith, Evelyn Shirley, "An Architectural Success of Central Illinois, George H. Miller," thesis paper for the



Master of Arts program, University of Iowa, provided courtesy of the McLean County Historical Society; Smedley, Gene, "Back Then," *Pantagraph* July 6, 1997.

22. Clyde Noble scrapbook, Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections; *Pantagraph*, May 4, 1955.

23. *Daily Pantagraph*, Bloomington, Illinois, February 8, 1900; February 14, 1900.

24. *Bandwagon*, July-August 1963.

25. Communication with the La Crosse County Historical Society December 4, 1984.

26. See Steve Gossard, *A Reckless Era of Aerial Performance, the Evolution of Trapeze*, 1994, for a chronology of trapeze development.

27. Photo in the Clyde Noble scrapbook, Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections.

28. Undated *Daily Pantagraph* article, Clyde Noble scrapbook, Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections; *Pantagraph* May 4, 1955;

29. *Ibid.*, November 14, 1936.

30. *New York Clipper*, March 11, 1893; *Billboard*, April 10, 1909; *The Springfield Sunday Union and Republican* of Springfield, Massachusetts, August 1, 1943; *Daily Pantagraph*, January 26, 1972; Unidentified article from Charles Noble's scrapbook, Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections; *Billboard*, April 10, 1909.

31. *New York Clipper* March 21, 1885.

32. *Ibid.*, July 23, 1892; *White Tops*, December 1936-January 1937.

33. *New York Clipper* May 19, 1894; September 8 and 15; February 9, 1895; *Daily Pantagraph*, September 20, 1951.

34. Barnum and Bailey program 1910.

35. *Billboard*, April 8, 1911; September 23, 1911; *Daily Pantagraph* February 27, 1912.

36. *Ibid.*, May 20, 1911; February 12, 1912; February 27, 1912.

37. *New York Clipper*, April 3, 1880; June 23, 1883; June 30, 1883; November 3, 1883; April 11, 1885; May 16, 1885; June 23, 1888; May 24, 1890; March 7, 1891; May 9, March 11, 1893; April 22, 1893.

38. Ringling Bros. Circus Route Book 1882-1914 p. 77; Dunn Collection slide, Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections; Ringling Route Book 1896, p. 38; Ringling Route Book 1882-1914, p. 92; Ringling Program 1896, Display 11; *Daily Pantagraph* of Bloomington August 24-25, 1896; Ringling Program 1899, Display 20; *Billboard*, April 18, 1914, April 24, 1915, April 22, 1916, April 14, 1917; *The Springfield Sunday Union and Republican*, Springfield, Massachusetts, August 1, 1943; *Billboard*, October 5, 1912.

39. *Pantagraph*, September 20, 1951; Sells Floto route book, 1922, p. 6; *Pantagraph*, January 26, 1972; Flying Valentinos photo, author's collection.

40. *Pantagraph* June 7, 1931; *The Springfield Sunday Union and Republican*, Springfield, Massachusetts, August 1, 1943; *Pantagraph* July 4, 1951; Information courtesy of Jim Fogarty; Walt Graybeal interview February 4, 1986; *Pantagraph* June 7, 1931; *The Springfield Sunday Union and Republican*, Springfield, Massachusetts, August 1, 1943; Walt Graybeal interview February 4, 1986.

41. Interview with Walt Graybeal February 27, 1985; *Billboard*, July 13, 1935; Walt Graybeal interview, June 24, 1987.

42. *The Springfield Sunday Union and Republican*, Springfield, Massachusetts, August 1, 1943; Moynahan, James, interview with Lowell Sherer, July 29, 1959, Milner Library Special Collections.

43. Interview with Walt Graybeal and Howard Waters, May 21, 1987.

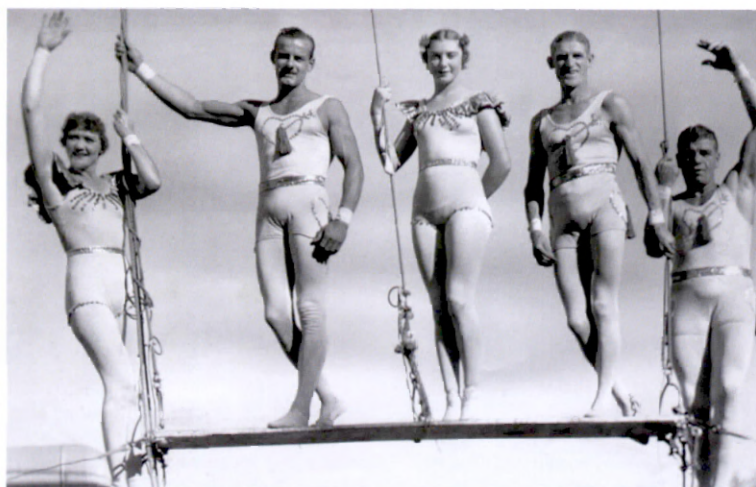
44. *Pantagraph* September 20, 1951; *Billboard*, February 28, 1948, p. 51; March 13, 1948, p. 76; April 17, 1948, p. 95; Graybeal and Waters, May 21, 1987.

45. *Ibid.*, April 9, 1949, p. 66; April 22, p. 69; May 20, p. 67; June 10, p. 56.

46. *Pantagraph* September 20, 1951; interview with Gilbert Hoover, June 13, 1991; *The Springfield Sunday Union and Republican*, Springfield, Massachusetts, August 1, 1943; *Pantagraph*, January 26, 1972.

47. *Billboard*, May 10, 1913.

48. *Daily Bulletin*, August 23, 1914; Bloomington city directory, 1915; *Billboard*, April 14, 1917, p. 66; *Billboard*, May 28, 1921, p. 68; June 11, 1921, p. 48; Identified from a scrapbook photograph of the Flying Fishers, 1921 which sold on eBay on April 5, 2005.



Bob Fisher's act on Russell Bros. Circus in 1936. Left to right Frances Fisher, Eldon Day, Maxine Fisher, Bob Fisher and Joe Ramiletts. Pfening Archives.

49. *Billboard*, February 20, 1915, p. 57; Correspondence, Braathen scrapbooks, Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections; Bloomington city directory, 1924.

50. Basse, Craig, *Tampa Bay Times*, December 6, 2008; Interview with Walt Graybeal, July 13, 1987.

51. *Tarpon Springs Leader*, April 20, 1977, p. 8, provided courtesy of Delores Boyd.

52. All genealogical information for Robert Musselman provided by Delores Boyd;

53. Arnold Riegger correspondence, Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections; *Pantagraph*, March 8, 1939.

54. Five Fearless Flyers letterhead, Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections.

55. *Billboard*, November 21, 1931; *Billboard*, February 27, 1932; December 12, 1931; February 27, 1932; February 11, 1932; Interview with Harold Genders, March 25, 1993.

56. *Billboard*, September 2, 1932; October 28, 1932.

57. *Billboard*, June 20; March 3, 1934; March 31, 1934; April 21, 1934; Schoepfel, Gary, *Bloomington-Normal Magazine*, "Kicking Sawdust," Part III, March 1979; *Billboard*, May 5, 1934; Photos from the Arnold Riegger Collection, Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections; *Billboard*, June 2; November 24, 1934; December 1, 1934.

58. *Ibid.*, January 12, 1935; March 23, 1935; May 11, 1935; July 28, 1935; September 21, 1935.

59. *Ibid.*, February 20, 1937; February 20, 1937; May 1; June 26; November 20; December 4.

60. *Ibid.*, April 23, 1938; November 12, 1938; January 22, 1938; March 5, 1938.

61. *Ibid.*, July 29, 1939; July 13, 1940.

62. *Billboard*, May 20, 1916, p. 51, p. 72; May 12, 1917; July 28; March 16, 1918; April 10, 1937; February 15, 1919; *New York Clipper*, April 1, 1882; June 14, 1884.

63. *Daily Bulletin*, January 2, 1910; *Daily Pantagraph*, January 3, 1910; Clyde Noble scrapbook, Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections.

64. "Bird Millman Tent Profiles the Aerial LeRays," *White Tops*, January-February 1959.

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66. Smith, Morton, *Hobbies*, Nov. 1950.

67. *Terre Haute Tribune*, September 12, 1913; *Bulletin*, January 3, 1912; Unidentified newspaper, Clyde Noble scrapbook, "Express and Advertiser," December 17, 1913; Flying Fishers' letterhead, Illinois State University, Milner Library Special Collections; *White Tops*, September-October 1950, p. 5.

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# BEATTY CIRCUS MOVES TO DELAND

The Wintering Site That  
Wasn't Supposed To Be

## PART THREE

By Lane Talburt

Frank McCloskey and Walter Kernan never intended DeLand, Florida, to be the winter quarters site for their newly-acquired touring attraction. Neither did Jerry Collins and Randolph Calhoun, major investors in the mobile outfit.

Having struck gold by reviving the bankrupt Clyde Beatty Circus in late summer 1956, the show's new owners fully expected to park the 15-car train and to house circus apparatus and animals at a new headquarters site in Sarasota. From that city on Florida's Gulf Coast they anticipated embarking on a 1957 route as America's only rail-based big-top circus.

Instead, the Beatty circus was forced to swap one fairgrounds site in Deming, New Mexico, for another at DeLand, which more than a half century later continues to host that show's successor, the John Pugh-owned Cole Bros. Circus.

Of paramount interest to the circus community in February 1957, however, was the announcement that the Beatty outfit was converting its operations to highway transport, like its larger rival, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, which eschewed tents for air-conditioned arenas and open-air ballparks.

Two insurmountable obstacles blocked the smaller show's plans, namely the opposition of Sarasota city and county officials who didn't want the nuisance of accommodating

the noisy and smelly animals of a third circus (beyond Ringling and Cristiani Bros.) within their jurisdictions, and the Big One's reported decision not to sell surplus rail cars from its own idled rail fleet which the Beatty show desperately needed.

Which raises an interesting question for circus historians: Did Art Concello, who had until just recently held a majority stake in Beatty's show, have an unseen hand in these setbacks?

That it was in Concello's interest to derail the Beatty outfit was fairly obvious to observers of the circus scene, then as today.

By the time the Beatty show was making its last stand of the 1956 season at the Collins-owned Sarasota dog track on November 20, the highly respected but wily Concello was already back at Ringling-Barnum's nearby winter quarters for his third stint as John Ringling North's executive director of operations. The former trapeze superstar may have been licking his wounds, at least briefly, over losing control of the Beatty three-ringer to McCloskey and Kernan, two of his former lieutenants on the Greatest Show on Earth.

Key figures and events that shaped relocating the Beatty assets to DeLand and the subsequent conversion from train to trucks—both accomplished under the deadline pressures—are the subjects of this article. In addition to *Billboard* magazine's coverage and Bob Goldsack's detailed 2004 book, *A Pictorial History of the Clyde Beatty Cole Bros. Circus*, the author has relied on two previously untapped resources. First, internet sites such as Newspaper Archives, and





Google News Archives revealed accounts written by reporters along the Beatty routes. And second, interviews with Emanuel "Junior" Ruffin provided valuable on-the-ground, eye-witness insights. As Clyde Beatty's cage boy and gun bearer from 1953 to 1958 and a recent Circus Ring of Fame inductee, Ruffin had unusual access (especially given his status as a black working man) to circus management both on tour and at winter quarters.

#### Sarasota, or Bust

The Ames Bros. popularized a song in the early 1950s which fairly well described the predicament facing Beatty General Manager McCloskey and principal investor Collins in late 1956 over where the circus would winter. The lyrics by Sid Robins and Charlie Shavers went like this:

"First you say you will, that's when you won't,  
Then you say you do, and then you don't,  
You're undecided now,  
So what are you going to do?"

Putting the circus's winter flag in Sarasota was the intention of McCloskey and Kernan from the moment they incorporated the Acme Circus Operating Co. in mid-July 1956 to run the Beatty tome, and of Jerry Collins and attorney Randolph Calhoun when they formed Sarasota Equipment Co. to front the money for the circus's physical assets. All four executives and their families had made their homes in Sarasota for a number of years, and Collins and Calhoun in particular carried considerable economic and political clout in the community.

Collins telegraphed that intent through a story in the *Sarasota Herald Tribune* on July 21, which noted "there are 27 acres near the Sarasota Kennel Club available for development as a winter quarters. Some 17 acres are located on De Soto Road and 10 acres are situated on Old Bradenton Road."

More than three months later, the issue remained resolved. On November 4, as the Beatty show was concluding a two-day stand in Jacksonville, its first stop in Florida, the paper issued this advisory: "Unless Clyde Beatty Shows receive more encouragement about wintering this season in Sarasota, the show may fold up its tents and steal away to some other community, Randolph Calhoun, an officer in the

A flat car and Clyde Beatty's private car in DeLand in March 1957. The car caught fire in 1959.



#### Disposal of the Beatty rail show.

The February 23, 1957 *Billboard* reported that the Clyde Beatty Circus would be converted to trucks. "Frank McCloskey stated that the show had already sold three sleepers. And that the show would use much of the older equipment and that only surplus rolling stock was being sold. He said he would not describe the surplus as complete enough to make up a new show with it. Included among the units that are being converted are the seat wagons that have served as blues on the Beatty Circus. They are being equipped with new under-carriages and fitted out as trailers. Three new seat trailers were built to be used as reserved seats, making eight seat trailers total." The No. 98 doniker and the No. 44 red ticket wagons were converted to trucks. A canvas spool truck was purchased from King Bros. Thirty new tractor trucks were purchased.

Ten surplus wagons were sold to the James E. Strates carnival. They were No. 31 cookhouse equipment; No. 40 side show; No. 41 concessions; No. 43 light plant; No. 45 white ticket wagon; No. 82 trunks; No. 84 wardrobe; No. 85 props; No. 90 big top canvas and No. 92 big top poles. Only five of wagons were used by Strates. Some wagons were given to the Circus World Museum.

The remaining surplus wagons were No. 30 cookhouse; No. 42 light plant; No. 46 menagerie canvas; No. 96 stake and chain; No. 81 bandstand; No. 80 flat bed and No. 83 flat bed. It is not known what happened to these. Fred D. Pfening, Jr.

circus holding company, said last night.

"Calhoun said three sites were being considered but one within the city limits on 12th street, halfway between U.S. 301 and the Ringling Show has apparently received the disapproval of City Manager Kenneth Thompson.

"Two other sites—one near the Sarasota Kennel Club and the other east of the Atlantic Coastline railroad—may be ruled out by the County Zoning Commission.

"We had figured on leaving our 16 train cars at the [Sarasota-Bradenton] airport," Calhoun said, "but now we have discovered the airport manager has not allowed us the space, and wants us to look elsewhere."

Other Beatty representatives were faring no better but put on a good show of bluster for public consumption. "Floyd King, general agent and traffic manager for the circus, and Howard Y. Bary, press agent, said sites in Orlando, Tampa, DeLand, Miami and Jacksonville also had been considered, but Sarasota was picked because of the 'circus atmosphere' here," the *Herald-Tribune* reported on November 14.

"Although our selection is subject to the approval of Frank McCloskey (circus general manager) and Walter Kernan (manager) it is pretty definite that we will winter in Sarasota," Bary said. . . . Bary and King claimed to have no knowledge of the local site that would be picked.

"We may encounter zoning difficulties," King admitted. "When some people discover they're going to have circus animals next door, they may put pressure on the zoning board to oust us."





A new semi and a surplus wagon in 1957.

Just two days later the would-be interlopers threw in the towel. After disclosing at a civic luncheon meeting . . . that the winter-quarters field had been narrowed to Sarasota and DeLand, Collins and Calhoun revealed later in the day they had chosen the latter community.

#### DeLand is My Land

"Officials of the circus report that they have signed a temporary contract with a 10-year option with Amusement Enterprises, Inc., owners of the former winter quarters of the Johnny J. Jones Carnival," said the Sarasota newspaper. "Collins said that this site has all the necessary facilities that are necessary for wintering a circus."

After the two season-ending performances at the Sarasota County fairgrounds on November 20, both attended and richly applauded by numerous idled Ringling performers and workers, the Beatty train was loaded for the last time for the move to the former Volusia County fairgrounds several hundred miles to the northeast not far from the Atlantic Ocean.

However, the circus's offices remained in Sarasota in the Commercial Court Building, owned by Calhoun, and some equipment was stored behind Collins' dog track.

Though the management team indicated that their struggle to make Sarasota the show's winter home was far from over, the presence of Big Bertha would complicate any wintertime homecoming attempts for the Beatty show. At the same time, McCloskey and Company must have begrudgingly acknowledged that the DeLand site was ideal for off-season hibernating.

The 40-acre parcel was no stranger to the footsteps of circus animals and humans and the embedded ruts of circus vehicles' wheels. The Volusia County fair's first manager, Hubert S. Talton, recalled in a November 1, 1979, article that the 1923 inaugural event "was held in frame wood buildings where the circus winters now."

Back then, reported the *Daytona Beach Daily Journal*, "the amusement and entertainment program included nightly fireworks, harness racing, vaudeville acts and a circus show with horses, elephants, tigers, lions and a man shot from a cannon."

In the meantime, the Jones railroad carnival set up its winter quarters at the same site. Following the

death of its founder, Johnny J. Jones, in DeLand on Christmas day 1930, the show was reorganized but continued under new ownership to winter at the county fairgrounds. That outfit featured Clyde Beatty and his big cat act as a back-end circus in the early 1940s.

After a 15-year run, the fair was suspended during the Great Depression. In 1941 city officials in DeLand, facing continuing shrinkage of its population of about 7,000 due to the lack of jobs, got a contract from the federal government to base wartime defense industries at the fairgrounds. The carnival agreed to move up the start of its 1942 touring season by a week so that the conversion to war footing could be accelerated.

The outbreak of the Korean conflict in 1950 forced the James E. Strates Shows out of their winter quarters at a reactivated Orlando air force base and the relocation of that rail carnival to the DeLand fair grounds for the winter of 1951-52. The Strates show later bought a permanent site just south of Orlando where it remains to this day. That carnival's owner would revisit the DeLand site in 1957 to purchase surplus flats and wagons with the Beatty circus.

#### No Time for Niceties

To those who stay with a circus on a year-round basis, one winter quarters location is about as good as the next. Largely due to the presence and visibility of exotic animals and migrant laborers, the wintering site is usually well off the beaten path. So it was for the Beatty circus, which had been quartered four miles east of Deming and now was situated four miles west of DeLand. Where Beatty had been actively courted by city officials at Deming, however, there was no similar welcome mat waiting at DeLand. The world famed wild animal trainer no longer had an ownership stake in the show. He was a contract player who had even less reason to hang out at winter quarters, choosing to spend as much of the off season as possible at his California home with wife Jane and son Clyde Jr. Beatty's congenial, engaging personality was likely missed when relationships were being established between the circus and the city in DeLand. As a result, periodic conflicts arose, becoming more than a little testy at times during the early years.

The old and the new in 1957.





Unlike the circus's experience in settling into Deming, when advance crews had plenty of time to refit the buildings at the old Deming air base before the arrival of the circus train in November 1953, there was no such luxury at the new site. Because DeLand was a wintering location of necessity, not convenience, buildings at the abandoned fair grounds had to be occupied in as-is condition.

Junior Ruffin remembers walking around his new temporary home after the train was parked on the dedicated spur inside the fenced compound. Among existing dilapidated structures were a horse barn, bunkhouse, cookhouse and a large grandstand. New York Avenue separated the new arrivals from the Atlantic Coast Line's main tracks and the station serving DeLand. On the opposite side of the winter quarters circus workers could frequently observe prisoners on a chain gang working the fields. "Every time there was an escape, prison guards would roust us out," Ruffin recalls.

Adjacent to the entrance was a grocery store where all workers could stock up on cigarettes and snacks, and a whites-only bar was across the street. Ruffin and other black laborers went to the DeLand's Spring Hill section some five miles away to find a laundromat or a restaurant that would serve them.

It was not that the winter quarters crew had much time to reflect on the events of the world around them. With elephant superintendent Richard Shipley having taken a similar position at Ringling-Barnum at the end of the 1956 tour, Ruffin had to double up on his animal care responsibilities. Ruffin said he became the de facto overseer of the nine show-owned elephants until Jimmy Odell was hired on. The elephants were on a picket line on one side of the former fair horse barn, and Beatty's cats were caged on the other. Ruffin assisted George Scott in feeding the lions and tigers and cleaning the separate compartments of their three

A semi fitted with seats from a rail show seat wagon.



George Chindahl, Fred Pfening and Floyd King in the DeLand winter quarters on March 27, 1957.

cage wagons while the animals exercised or napped in an outdoor steel arena. Several camels and llamas also called DeLand their winter home.

#### 1957 Plans Derailed

Adapting to the new environment and glad-handing community leaders were far from being the chief concerns of circus executives. Their most pressing problem was finding rail cars to replace the existing fleet, especially the two stock cars and four coaches. Some of these had seen service on the defunct Sparks Circus. With one coach dedicated to Clyde Beatty's use, this left three other sleepers to transport the combined Beatty-Ringling entourage on the second half of the 1956 tour. One coach housed candy butchers and staff, another the working men and the third was set aside for show girls and other female performers. The only toilet facilities on the train, Ruffin recalled, were "honey buckets" suspended underneath the coaches, each pail emptied at stops along the way or at the next lot by porters. "The coaches looked like they had once been robbed by the Jesse James gang," the retired kinker chuckled.

The wooden stock cars and coaches had been "condemned by the railroads" because their wheel carriages were served by friction boxes rather than ball bearings. Knowing that the obsolete cars could not be used for the coming season, McCloskey and Kernan began searching for replacements, and rumors circulating around the show indicated that the circus train might be expanded to 20 or 25 cars. "They wanted to keep holding onto the title of being the last remaining railroad circus," Ruffin said. Converting to overland travel "was a last-minute decision, I think, made in DeLand," he added.

Rumors abounded at winter quarters that





One of Beatty's wild animal cages, formerly an auto transport semi.

Beatty executives had approached Ringling-Barnum to buy cars sitting unused in Sarasota since the past July, when Big Bertha's three sections returned from the closing in Pittsburgh. It's unlikely that either John Ringling North or Art Concello would have been anxious to help the Beatty managers who were once subservient on the Greatest Show on Earth. Concello in particular thought he had the winning hand when the Beatty show went bankrupt in California in May 1956. After all, he had bought a 51 per cent stake in the show in 1955 and was still holding a \$50,000 mortgage on the Beatty assets at the time of the collapse. But McCloskey and Kernan, who had obtained the concession privilege from Beatty prior to the launch of the 1956 season, managed to outmaneuver their former boss and, with Collins' financial backing, bought out Concello's interests.

Even if the Ringling honchos had been willing to negotiate, they, too, were preoccupied by and absorbed in the minutia of fielding a totally new show and trucking it to a series of all new indoor and outdoor locations—with the notable exception of New York's Madison Square Garden and the Boston Garden.

#### Conversion to Concrete

With general agent Floyd King solidifying the Beatty route for the fast-approaching season, the pragmatic management team gave in to the inevitable, as reported by *Billboard* on February 23, 1957. "DELAND, Fla.—Clyde Beatty Circus is a motorized show. It has acquired a fleet of new trucks and is disposing of its railroad equipment.

"General Manager Frank McCloskey said Thursday (Feb. 14) that the final decision had been made only a few days ago, although the change has been probable for some time. . .

"The show already has sold three sleepers. . . . It was learned that these cars are to be junked by their new owner. . . .

"Three flat cars and two stock cars are being offered now. . . . The other six flats which made up the Beatty train don't figure in the present offerings, and Beatty executives declined to comment about them.

"Included among the units that are being converted," the *Billboard* article continued, "are the seat wagons that have served as blues on the Beatty Circus the past two years.

These are being equipped with new under-carriages and fitted out as trailers.

"In addition to the five seat wagons already being used, the show is building three more units. These will be for reserved seats. . .

"Beatty has a new 140-foot big top built by United States Tent.

"McCloskey said that Walter Kernan, assistant manager, was in Detroit last week to talk with acts that are appearing there with the Orin Davenport Circus. Kernan also was shopping for new semitrailers for special loads."

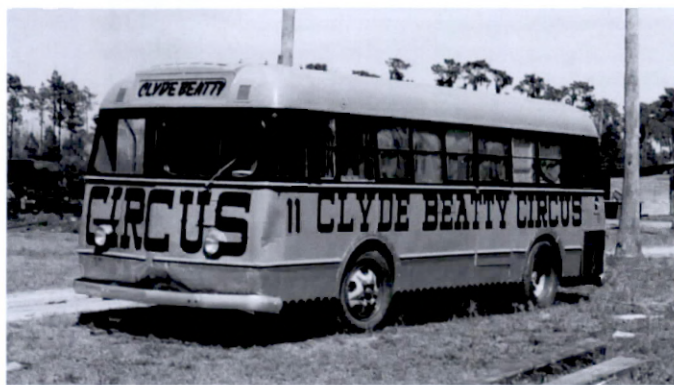
After completing the winter Shrine dates, Beatty and his cage crew returned to the new winter quarters, where work was being rushed for the show's April 17 opener at the DeLand Armory.

"Crews have been working up to 18 hours daily in readying the show for its new operation," reported the *Billboard* on April 13. "More than 20 new tractors have been delivered. Special semi-trailers are being assembled from many parts of the country. To these are added such custom-built equipment as the former King Bros.' canvas spool truck.

"Circus staffers report that more than \$200,000 is being spent in building the circus virtually all new in about 90 days. . . .

"Only seven of the rail show wagons are being carried over to the truck show. The steel body of the office wagon has been transferred to a new sprung chassis. . . . The show is now expecting to retain its standard grandstand with individual chairs for reserves. . .

"Beatty's own act now will be moved on two converted auto transport trailers. On one have been placed two of the cage wagon bodies from the rail show. On the other is the



Bus used as band sleeper.

third cage body plus space for the steel arena. The two trucks handle the act in full and can be used on winter dates as well as for the summer circus."

Ruffin said lions were transported in two cages on one cut-down car carrier, while tigers occupied the single wagon on the trailer bed that also carried the arena and cage props. The later trailer sagged under the weight and was replaced by a flat-bed trailer. Ruffin said he earned extra money by utilizing his welding skills.

Beatty's cage boy also was assigned to drive one of the new tractors, pulling the pole wagon from lot to lot. He slept in a box behind the cab. Though the show provided



sleepers, many working men chose to snooze outdoors once the caravan reached the new lot after a late-night move. Most show folks would quickly recognize the time-saving advantages of not having to cart the circus apparatus and animals between the old train and the lot.

A two-day jump from DeLand to Charleston, South Carolina, gave the newly outfitted road caravan its first test. Sporting a new big top from U.S. Tent, a side show-menagerie combo, snake pit and a whale show, the circus made an impressive midway splash.



Water and canvas boom truck.

#### Roll out the Profits

By the end of the third week, Collins was declaring success, having spent a week with the show in Virginia. Still serving as a media cheerleader, the co-owner boasted to the *Sarasota Journal* that the circus was playing to an average of 6,000 a day, and that attendance was increasing with each date.

"The circus opens in Philadelphia May 26 for a 10-day stand which Collins said has brought a \$50,000 guarantee. From there the show moves on into New York and then into Canada..."

"By its streamlined move, the circus has cut daily overhead from \$6,000 to \$3,500," the May 15 account continued. "Collins said the show has over 50 units moving on the highways—mostly Chevrolet trucks and Fruehauf re-built trailers. Personnel includes 150 people classified as workers and performers—and 250 all told. . . ."

In spite of Collins's braggadocio about the Philadelphia advance, circus historian Goldsack pointed out that "the stand turned out to be the first disappointment of the season....This date at Lighthouse Field had been played by Ringling in 1956 (prior to the end of Big Bertha's tented era) and also featured the James E. Strates Shows carnival midway. . . . Paid attendance for the week engagement amounted to a meager 20,000 an average of only 1,428 per performance and the show had to split 50-50 for this date."

Yet another comedown awaited the acclaimed wild animal trainer when he and his cats appeared

on the Ed Sullivan show on May 19. The nationally televised appearance was timed to boost New York-area dates, which opened with a two-day stand on Staten Island on May 13-14 and an eight-day run on Long Island. It turned out to be an unmitigated disaster for the world-renown trainer, as the accompanying sidebar explains.

Fortunately, the on-Broadway downer was an exception to the rave reviews which the show received on its 1957 route.

"It is an action-packed show from the time of Beatty's explosive entry with his wild animal routine, to the nine-elephant long mount that closed the show," the *Billboard* reported on May 27.

A photo in Goldsack's book on the Beatty-Cole epic shows Ruffin working a trio of elephants in Ring 1. Ruffin recalled that Syd, Annie Mae and Hattie were presented by Leona (Martha Carson), a Ringling alumna. Styling on elephants in the two other rings, according to *Billboard*, were Irene Ward (Audrey) and Rae Kane (Alpaugh). Ruffin also continued his duties as Beatty's gun bearer and cage boy.

Featured performers in the one-hour, forty-minute show included the Alberto Zoppe-Cucciolo riding act, the Fort-Seitz-Mendez Trio on high wire, and the Sabre Jets with Dick Anderson catching and Juan Rodriguez, Billy Ward and Encarnacion.

Count Nicolas was back from the 1956 second tour as equestrian director, and Ray Aguilar repeated as director of the seven-member band.

Almost a parenthetical event, one that received scant media coverage, was the May 22 court proceeding in Macon, Georgia, in which Clyde Beatty's National Circus Corp. was discharged from its bankruptcy filing of a year earlier.

#### Boosting Show, Cutting Costs

When the show reached New England in late July, McCloskey left the lot briefly return to visit his parents in Norwich, Connecticut, where he had spent much of his boyhood. In an interview with the *New London Evening Day* on

The midway in 1957.





June 26, he said the circus had "made money in all but a few performances" since it was organized by him and Walter Kernan.

"Ordinarily the show carries \$1,000,000 insurance but it had to be upped before being allowed to enter the state.

"This high rate went into effect in the wake of the tragic fire of July 6, 1944, in Hartford which destroyed the big top of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Combined Shows and killed 168 persons. . . .

"The cost of setting up a circus every day?

"It costs I would say \$7,500 each time," McCloskey replied."

The time-and-money-saving changes did not go unnoticed.

San Antonio *Light* reporter Marjorie Clap made these deft observations in an October 15 story: "It took two hours less to assemble than in past years because of new streamlined equipment.

"In past years, it took more than 500 men to put the show together. Today, it takes only 250—thanks to the new mechanical equipment.

"The biggest difference is in the big tent itself.

"Formerly put together from four quarters of canvas, it now comes in two large sections. Workmen before had to roll or unroll the canvas by hand.

"Now, when the tent is taken down, it's rolled hydraulically onto two large spools on a big truck—and unrolled the same way.

"The wooden poles which once held the big tent in place have been replaced by telescopic aluminum ones that are lighter and easier to handle.

"The circus also has an automatic stake driver for punching the smaller stakes into the ground which hold the tent ropes in place.

"There's another machine for jerking them up again.

"The big top's bleachers, once wooden, are now all steel.

"Clyde Beatty, the star of the circus, traveled in a private railroad car until last year. Now, he's transported overland in a chauffeur-driven auto.

"But perhaps the most marked difference in the circus today and of yesteryear was in circus fans themselves.

"There were several men who turned out to watch the circus rigged Tuesday morning—but not a single, solitary small boy."

#### Sarasota WQ Nixed, Again

As the Beatty show entered the home stretch of its first full season under McCloskey's stewardship, Collins and company were still trying to finesse a deal to allow the circus to base all operations out of their hometown. On October 25, the *Sarasota Journal* reported that "the Clyde Beatty Circus, which passed up Sarasota for DeLand after zoning and other site troubles at the close of its tour last year, may join Ringling and Cristiani in wintering here as of the close of the season, one its owners, Sarasota attorney Randolph Calhoun, revealed today.

"Equipment will be stored here again this year, but the circus will again have to use the Johnny J. Jones show buildings at DeLand for service work because the Beatty show closes down next month, and plans for a full-scale winter quarters couldn't be completed until next year."

That the show's largest investor remained confident of cracking local opposition—at least in public—was evident in a *Sarasota Herald Tribune* story on November 10. "Collins added that within the next 24 months the circus hopes to erect a new, permanent winter quarters on a 17-acre tract opposite the dog track north of Sarasota, complete with all new equipment and facilities."

The co-owner also was bullish on the show's finances, telling a *Herald-Tribune* writer on November 19 that the 1957 tour, covering 15,000 miles in the U.S. and Canada (*Billboard* listed route mileage of 13,184), was "the best season in the history of the Beatty show."

Five days later, on November 24, a story in the same



The two wild animal cage semis in 1957.

paper may have torpedoed what little support remained for the Beatty show's move when Art Concello announced that "the Ringling Circus 'winter season' would be cut to February 10 to March 1 (1958) because the 'streamlined,' no-big-top operation had made a year-round tour possible. Concello said the circus would winter here just long enough to work in new acts and renew the show for additional engagements."

Though the decision to exclude the public from the 30-year-old tourist destination made perfect economic sense to North and Concello, it triggered a series of events that stressed relations between circus management and local governing bodies to the breaking point.

Having returned to DeLand, the Beatty show cancelled a scheduled December 7 post-season showing in Sarasota so it could prepare for its first venture to Puerto Rico, a several-week engagement in San Juan opening December 11. Beatty also appeared with his big-cat routine for the annual Detroit Shrine date and in Hawaii and before opening with his namesake circus for the 1958 season.

#### Shop-til-drop Spree

Though Jerry Collins continued to be thwarted in his efforts to winter the show in Sarasota, he engineered a series of deals in early 1958 that grabbed attention in the local circus community—and probably left many scratching their



heads in confusion.

Readers of the Sunday morning, January 26, edition of the Daytona Beach *News-Journal* awoke to the front-page news that "Ponce De Leon Springs Park was purchased yesterday by the Clyde Beatty circus and dog track promoter Jerry Collins for about a half million dollars.

"Collins said circus equipment and wild animals valued at \$1 million will be moved to the 54-acre tourist attraction just west of U.S. 17 beginning tomorrow. The combined scenic tours at the Springs and the famous circus will begin operations as soon as the moving is completed, Collins said.

"The circus, with its more than 60 wild animals, is in winter quarters near DeLand. Visitors will be able to watch performers and animals train at the Springs, eat in the cook-



A semi with a large title on the side.

house and tour the actual preparation for shows. . . .

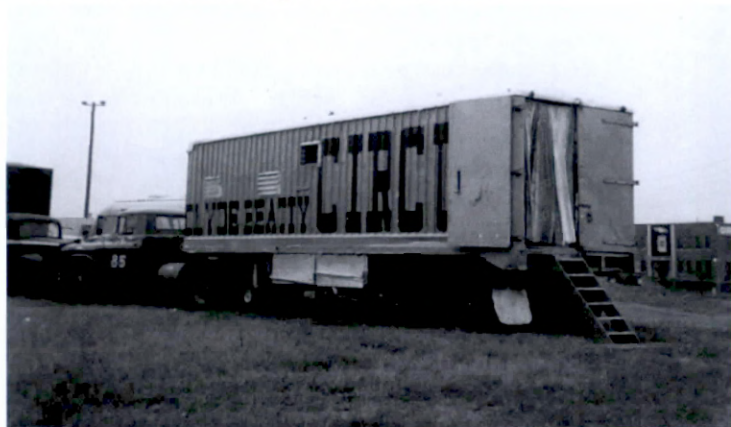
"The track operator, who termed the new attraction, 'the Disneyland of Florida,' is president of the new organization, which named Phillip C. Gossett, second vice president, and Robert B. Dunbar, general manager. Dunbar and Gossett were the former owners of the Springs.

"Walter Kernan, former assistant manager of the Ringling Bros. Circus and co-owner of the Beatty Circus, is new executive vice president. Other officers are Frank McCloskey, former Ringling Circus manager, secretary; Randolph Calhoun, Sarasota attorney, treasurer, and Floyd King, press representative."

In addition to housing what *Billboard* termed as "surplus animals from the Clyde Beatty Circus menagerie," Collins contemplated a water circus with ski rides and a reptile farm at the facility, which was only four miles north of DeLand.

If Sarasota civic boosters could take a ho-hum attitude

Another semi with a large title on the side.



toward the Ponce de Leon Springs development plans, they could hardly ignore a series of media volleys by Collins and Ringling-Barnum officials a month later.

Collins struck first on Saturday, February 22, purchasing Edith Ringling's Sarasota mansion at auction for \$202,000 cash, plus \$25,000 for its furnishings.

News of this acquisition was overshadowed by the Ringling-Barnum announcement on Monday, February 24, that the Big One was closing its winter quarters. Initially, the circus comptroller said that "the grounds, equipment and animals would be sold within 30 days." This statement was amended to point out that only surplus animals and equipment would be up for sale, not the land.

Almost immediately, Collins jumped into the breach to keep the media waters boiling. On Tuesday, February 25, he indicated to the Sarasota *Herald-Tribune* that "he and his associates would like to buy the Circus Winter Quarters and perhaps the Ringling Bros. and Barnum Bailey Circus itself, while mentioning that another circus may eventually use the grounds."

In an interview with reporter Bolivar O'Rear, "Collins said he was forming a corporation with about \$1 1/2 million in capital to develop the Edith Ringling mansion as a showplace and memorial and the winter quarters as a tourist attraction if possible. . . . He apparently hoped to announce the purchase of the winter quarters . . . but was unable to do so.

"Present at the interview yesterday," the *Herald-Tribune's* February 26 article continued, "Calhoun said they wanted to have a circus at the winter quarters in Sarasota 'even if it means bringing the Beatty Circus here from DeLand.'

"However, Collins quickly emphasized this would only be done 'subject to not breaking faith with the people in DeLand who have supported the development of the Ponce de Leon Springs.'"

That led to further speculation on Thursday, February 27, by the Sarasota *Journal*: "Would John Ringling North, president of the circus who controls 51 per cent, sell out to Stuart Lancaster, a kinsman whose associates control 49 per cent?"

"Or would he sell out to Jerry Collins, race track owner and director of the Clyde Beatty Circus? . . .

"Collins has expressed an interest in acquiring the Ringling Circus to save the situation for Sarasota. This morning he said he had not made direct contact with North.

"But he insisted he had a group which could take over the Ringling Circus and make a go of it, and keep it based in Sarasota, too. He wants to maintain the circus heritage here.

"Collins said he and his associates would see about buying the circus and they would not be stopped by a \$3 million price tag—if it were worth it."

As if to demonstrate that money was no object, the 50-year-old Collins plunged ahead with other investments

#### "Texas Jim" Finds New Home

The front-page headline on the Saturday, March 1, 1958, Sarasota *Herald-Tribune* said it all: "Elephant, Reptile Farm, Race Track: Collins Continues Buying." In addition to purchasing the Magnolia horse racing track in New Orleans, the wheeler-dealer revealed that he had acquired the Sarasota-based animal and reptile farm of



Texas Jim Mitchell for more than \$100,000. A water-skiing elephant, Sally, also went with the latter transaction.

Collins said he would move "the Mitchell establishment out near (Ringling) circus quarters . . . 'lock, stock and barrel' to Ponce de Leon Springs. . . . Collins said of Texas Jim: 'He's a great fellow and the best rattlesnake man in the country.'"

Continued the *Herald-Tribune* report: "Randolph Calhoun, who is a lawyer in Sarasota who has handled deals for the quick-hitting Collins abroad, revealed that Texas Jim has been staging shows of his own at Ponce de Leon Springs for the last three Sundays, making a terrific hit with his serpents. More than 1,000 birds, animals and snakes will go with Mr. and Mrs. Jim Mitchell to the mid-Florida attraction, on which Collins intends to spend millions."

Amid this flurry of activities, McCloskey and Kernan remained focused on Job Number One: fielding another quality performance for the Beatty show's 1958 outing.

Following the Detroit and Hawaiian stands, Beatty and his crew flew directly to New York for a four-week confrontation at a site almost in the back yard of Ringling-Barnum's most lucrative playground, Madison Square Garden. The inaugural performance merited a small story in the *New York Times*: "CLIFFSIDE PARK, N.J., April 4—The Clyde Beatty and Hamid-Morton combined circus opened a one-month stand here tonight in Palisades Amusement Park. The heated tent was jammed with 4,200 persons.

"Mr. Beatty and his wild animal act, in which there are twenty-six Nubian lions and Royal Bengal tigers, are featured, along with Emmett Kelly, the clown, throughout the performance, Miss Josephine Bernosi, a fifth-generation high-wire artist, and Hugo Zacchini, who is shot from a cannon in the final number.

"The amusement park opened at noon for the season."

A media blitz preceding the tented show's debut garnered prominent photo placement in newspapers and magazines for a water-skiing elephant, appropriately named Beatty Hamid, on the Hudson River separating New York from New Jersey. (This likely was the same little elephant

A former Beatty wagon on the James E. Strates carnival. Dave Price photo.



A new animal semi trailer in 1957.

acquired by Jerry Collins only weeks before.) The circus offered two shows a day during the Easter Week break and a three-pack of performances on weekends. General admission tickets were priced at \$1.65 for adults and 50 cents for children (90 cents for matinees). Upgrades were \$2.50 and \$1.50 respectively.

Goldsack pointed out that the combo's gate receipts were good through Easter week, but tapered off precipitously for the weeknight shows, even with the discounted kiddie fares.

Junior Ruffin was not among the Beattyites who opened the regular season in Allentown, Pennsylvania, on May 6. The cage crew member, now 20, decided to strike out on his own, accepting an offer by Mrs. Evelyn Curry to break in and present a group of young lions for her at shopping malls and parks in the Northeast. Ruffin returned to the Beatty fold that fall in winter quarters.

The 1958 season had all the earmarks of success even before it left DeLand.

#### 1958 Looks Great--Moneywise

On March 23 the Sarasota *Herald-Tribune* reported that "advance sales have surpassed the \$200,000 figure, Collins said, noting that in Ottawa alone, \$32,000 worth of tickets have been sold.

"We have the most mechanized unit ever to travel the highway," Collins said, noting that the circus is traveling with a minimum of 350 personnel. . . . Collins said there will be 75 units on trucks, including performers, concessions and the menagerie.

"In addition, the sideshow, now managed by Bill English, anchored a midway which also featured hippo and ape walk-through semis as Single O's.

"Last year we played to over a million people," [Collins] said, noting that Clyde Beatty, star of the show, is the outstanding act in the circus world. . . .

"Collins asserted that 'we're sticking to the kind of circus that has been prominent in America for the last 150 years. We're just revitalizing and retaining the standards of the American show.'"

Among the seven new acts ballied by Collins was the Gaona family on high wire. The circus program touted the new Ponce de Leon Springs park and its attractions in a full-page ad. Several trucks bore the painted inscription "Visit the Home of Clyde Beatty Circus--Ponce de Leon Springs--DeLand, Fla." In return, the Acme Circus Corp. received



tax abatement from the City of DeLand. This practice followed a pattern established years before between Ringling-Barnum and Sarasota governmental entities.

Rapidly-moving events on the Ringling front—particularly the aftermath of shuttering winter quarters as a tourist attraction—had complicated Collin's oft-repeated plans to set up its winter quarters in Sarasota. Mounting tension over the Big One's winter habitat also was creating problems for the Cristiani Circus.

"Cristiani officials have indicated they might move winter quarters from Sarasota," the *Herald-Tribune* reported on October 17. "The Sarasota County Zoning Board of Appeals recently denied a Cristiani petition to install permanent sanitary facilities at its present quarters, located in a residential zone on Gocio Rd."

That trial balloon coincided with the filing of an application by Pete Cristiani and a Sarasota real estate investor with the Manatee County Zoning Board seeking to have property on U. S. 301 rezoned to commercial status. According to the newspaper account, "Cristiani Circus had evinced interest in the site for winter quarters."

Meanwhile, Collins and his co-investors in the de Leon Springs venture apparently became disenchanted and sold their stake in this latest venture. They also cut loose Texas Jim Mitchell and his assortment of reptiles and animals. When the Mitchells reclaimed their old haunts, they brought along a few animals from the circus menagerie. Almost immediately they attracted the wrong kind of attention, as reported by the *Sarasota Journal* on December 1: "The rumble of growling tigers and the chatter of monkeys sounded again this morning in a weed-grown lot on Fruitville Road.

"The animals, packed in crates, were the first signs of Texas Jim Mitchell's return to Sarasota. . . .

"The revamped farm here will include Clyde Beatty's tigers, which will be trained at Texas Jim's quarters. . . .

"Activity is expected to pick up at the farm from now until Christmas, when the opening is scheduled. This morning about 10 crates of animals were at the site, but more were due to arrive this afternoon."

Local officials quickly put the kibosh on the under-the-radar reinstallation.

#### **Cole Bros. Title Returns**

The four Beatty circus partners had bigger fish to fry. Less than a week after their show returned from a successful 1958 tour, an AP release on November 8 confirmed what had been rumored for some time in the industry press: "Circus officials announced . . . the establishment of the Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. combined shows. It will be billed as the world's largest circus under the big top. . . .

"The action actually amounts to a revamping of the Beatty show. Cole Bros. circus, a pioneer in the field, has been a circus in name only."

In late summer, the owners of the Beatty tome acquired the Cole title from their own legal adjuster, Frank Orman and Bill Price, vice president of Cole Bros. Corp.

"Many speculated that the owners were not sure how

#### **BEATTY'S ACT BRINGS DOWN CURTAINS, FOR ALL THE WRONG REASONS**

Clyde Beatty must have done everything imaginable to erase the memories of his May 19, 1957, performance on Ed Sullivan's "really big shew." The wild animal trainer's Broadway stage debut may have been the most embarrassing of his entire career, especially with a nationwide audience watching.

"Everything that could have gone wrong did go wrong," conceded Manuel "Junior" Ruffin, Beatty's cage boy and gun bearer.

Promoted by Beatty's publicity corps to boost attendance at New York area circus performances, the set up was a logistical nightmare.

Having completed his act—second on the bill—at a matinee on Long Island, Beatty and his crew of 20-25 men rushed into Manhattan, parking the two separate lion and tiger cage trucks back to back in front of the theater on Broadway between West 53rd and West 54th Streets. Though the chute leading from the cage to the pavement was normal, the tunnel runs were quite different.

The cage crew was accustomed to staking the tunnels to dirt or paved lots. To get the cats to the theater stage, however, required wooden flooring to be laid under the tunnel sections and slanted up two flights of stairs, Ruffin recalled.

Because of space limitations on the theater stage, Tommy Clarke's prop crew was forced to erect Beatty's arena in a square configuration. Combining the jerry rigged, up-hill tunnels runs, the boxy arena and the strange environment was a recipe for calamity.

Though Ruffin had to remain behind the back curtains as the mixed-wild animal act was ushered into the steel confines, he could hear the cats' uproar when host Ed Sullivan introduced Beatty, and the curtains were opened.

One of the lions refused to comply with the trainer's commands, and the scene turned chaotic.

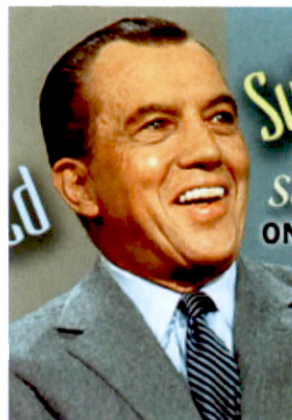
The resulting act showed up not only on viewers' screens throughout America that Sunday night but also in a CBS special on the Best of Sullivan that was televised in 1991.

Reviewing the sequence in the latter-day tribute to the celebrity host, *Washington Post* writer Tom Shales offered this post mortem of the 1957 fiasco on November 23, 1991: "Sullivan required Beatty to perform the act in too small a space and he lost control of the big beasts. Since this was live, the show had to go on. Sullivan wandered out into the audience to introduce celebrities. Under his chatter, you hear the growls of lions and the repeated firing of Beatty's gun. It's scary even now."

Indeed, these were intense moments for the renowned trainer, as the cage crew attempted to prod the big cats back into the tunnel and back to their truck-mounted cages.

"I've got to give him credit," Ruffin said of his boss's bravery. "There's no way I would get myself caught in that arena."

After the one-hour show, Beatty's combined crews took considerably longer than normal to dismantle the set up, then headed back to the Long Island lot where the featured performer of the Clyde Beatty Circus would face some 20 cats for two shows on Monday.



long Beatty and his fame would last," Goldsack wrote, "and wanted another name that could become a part of the title. In turn, they hoped that somewhere down the line the Cole



Bros. title could stand alone when the Beatty part of the show's name was passé."

When the fleet pulled out of DeLand in the spring of 1959, vehicles were freshly lettered with "Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus," a name the show would promote for the next 45 years, long after Beatty's death in 1965.

With the Beatty-Cole and Ringling-Barnum shows continuing their springtime across-the-river completion in Palisades Park and Madison Square Garden and their subsequent 1959 truck tours the Sarasota winter quarters saga simmered in the background.

On November 3, the sale became official. "SARASOTA (AP)—The winter quarters of Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus were purchased today for \$340,000 by a development firm.

"Milton N. Weir of Boca Raton, president of Arvida Corp., said the property was included in a deal involving \$1,582,000. He said Arvida plans to turn the 160 acre tract and 1,242 acres of the adjoining Newburn estate into a residential community.

"A circus official said the organization hopes to keep its winter quarters in Sarasota and seeks a smaller tract for its location."

More specifically, Ringling-Barnum's Concello was seeking "formation of a winter quarters-amusement park complex on a rent-free location," the *Herald-Tribune* revealed on November 22. This followed the deliberately-set fire that claimed historic circus wagons in the aftermath of the real estate deal. "At week's end no one in Sarasota County or Manatee County knew where the 100 acres of free land might be found."

Ringling's break from Sarasota—but not from Sarasota County—came in late December when Concello announced that the long-time circus resident would set up house the following year in Venice, some 20 miles south on the Tamiami Trail. Beatty-Cole partners continued to chafe in the background as the New Year arrived.

#### No Place Like Home—in DeLand

"According to Calhoun, the Sarasota County Chamber of

Roland Butler drew the first letterhead used by the Clyde Beatty Circus in 1957. With modifications it was used for years. Pfening Archives.

Commerce had invited the circus to locate here and offer its cooperation," the *Herald-Tribune* noted on January 1, 1960. "However, when the Ringling Brothers Circus quarters and circus park proposal came up, Beatty Circus officials felt they were playing 'second fiddle' to the Ringling show.

"While admitting 'two good offers' from the East Coast during 'the Ringling controversy,' he declared that the owners would prefer to have the circus here for two good reasons.

"One reason would be the proximity to their homes and work. They now must travel 220 miles each way to visit the circus in DeLand.

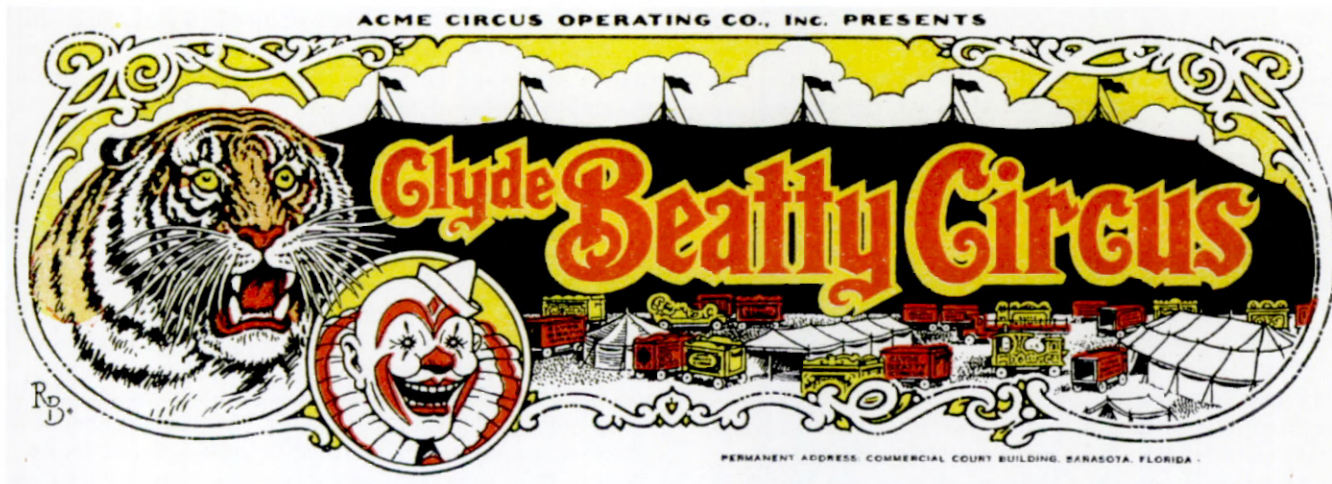
"A second reason is from the standpoint of 'personal pride' as Sarasotans in having Sarasota billed as the winter home of the Clyde Beatty Circus.

"Calhoun said the circus owners were not asking for free land for their location. And a large tract is not needed. He noted that 'we parked all our equipment and entertained 5,000 to 6,000 people on five to six acres in DeLand.'

"The Sarasota attorney also remarked: 'We advertise as the biggest show on the road . . . and with the most equipment. We have shown to over nine million people since 1956 and have taken the show north to the Artic Circle and south to San Juan, Puerto Rico. The Beatty-Cole quartet had another reason for being antsy about the relocation. On March 22, 1960, the *St. Petersburg Times* reported that "the winter quarters site in DeLand reportedly has been purchased by the city for industrial development." This explained the meeting of the four circus owners at the old fairgrounds site, "at which they agreed to come to Sarasota. [Sarasota County] Chamber of Commerce directors voted to back the move last week," the *St. Petersburg* account continued. "No mention has been made of the possible zoning problems which have plagued other attempts to open new circus attractions."

Though the owners speculated they might move the quarters to Englewood, where Calhoun held property, they finally conceded that DeLand would continue as the circus's winter grounds.

It was not until 1963, however, that the foursome closed the deal to make the old Volusia County fairgrounds their permanent site. Going into the 2010 circus season, DeLand had hosted the Clyde Beatty Circus and its successors for almost 55 years.





# BILL KASISKA'S LETTERHEADS



The Walt Disney Studios 1960 production of the classic children's book *Toby Tyler or Ten Weeks with a Circus* starred Kevin "Moochie" Corcoran in the title role. The movie chronicled the adventures of a runaway boy who quickly advanced from seat butcher to principle equestrian on Col. Sam Castle's Great American Circus. The ninety-five minute diversion included parade scenes showing the old Ringling Circus Swan Bandwagon and other vehicles now at Circus World Museum.

The move was based on the 1881 best seller of the same name. Originally serialized in *Harper's Young People* magazine in 1877, it was the first and most successful novel by James Otis Kaler (1848-1912), who wrote under the name James Otis.

This letterhead was used in 1959 and 1960 while the film was in production. The chimp in the upper right hand corner is Mr. Stubbs, one of the main characters.



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